

The Purpose of the School.

I find that the defects of conscientious teachers are for the most part to be traced to the want of a purpose, both as regards the general object of the school and the particular result of special studies.

"What is it that I propose to myself in School keeping?" is the first question which a young teacher should put to himself. His first duty is to form a purpose or practical ideal. A clearly defined purpose is not only the indispensable condition, but it is also the measure of progress. The question is, as it seems to me, best answered thus:—The object which the Schoolmaster ought to propose to himself is the Formation of Character. This is the ultimate purpose of the Parochial Schools, as it is of all education.

It is true that the objects of education, and even of such education as the parochial school affects to give, are, in their details, various, and seem at first sight inadequately summed up by the words "Formation of Character." The child, for example, has to be taught how best to preserve through life a sound mind in a sound body. In teaching him this, we must furnish him with the knowledge necessary for earning a livelihood; we must provide him with a certain amount of intellectual food; and above all, we must instruct him in those moral duties which it behoves him to know and practise. The moral teaching, again, can have due efficacy and adequate sanction only if we connect it with the will of the Unseen Power which sustains and administers the Universe: it thus becomes religious teaching, and this long before it assumes that more definite form of Christian faith which the school also inculcates. The necessities of the case thus demand that the pupils' mind shall be *informed* as well as *formed*.

But what is the purpose of all this instruction? It is to make men lead better lives; better intellectually, by giving greater activity, vigour, and precision to the powers by which they know and do; better, morally and religiously, by causing them to live in obedience to the laws of God as revealed in the nature of man and the visible order around him, and in harmony with the will of God as communicated in his Word. The bettering of men's wills, and the bettering of men's intellects, these are the great objects which we have in view.

Accordingly, if asked to sum up in a few words the end of Education, and to do so in words which will indicate its ultimate aim at the same time that they furnish the practical teacher with a criterion by which to measure every detail of his work, I can find no better or more exhaustive answer than that which has been given—"The Formation of Character."

But since the invigorating of the understanding, and the training of the will, are operations which cannot be conducted without materials, we are bound, in determining the nature of these materials, to allow ourselves to be controlled by the needs and facts of man's daily life.

The materials of parochial school education thus forced on us are at first sight so humble that it may with some show of truth be contended that they do not admit of a treatment in relation to a larger purpose outside themselves. If this be so, they are unsuited to the work they have to do, and the Schoolmaster, since no other material is available, inevitably sinks into a mere mechanic. This antagonism happily does not exist. The necessities of the pupils' future life, and the necessities of sound training, can easily be shown to harmonize. For, although in such formal matters as arithmetic and grammar the ideal may mean only a certain perfection of acquired knowledge in the pupil, accompanied by a certain amount of mental power developed in the process of acquisition; yet, when even these subjects are ethically taught—that is to say, so handled as to be brought into close concrete connexion with their ultimate uses in common life, they pass into a higher category, and contribute their full share to the attainment of the ultimate purpose of the school. In the elementary school, if nowhere else, purely formal studies have, when rightly understood, a moral significance.

If the purpose of the parochial school has been correctly stated, something has already been done towards defining the position

and work of the Schoolmaster. If it be true that he is set apart by society, in order that he may direct his daily energies towards the formation of character in the children of the people, he cannot fail to feel that he is engaged in an elevating, and inspiring, nay, more, a *creative* task. He is in truth, if he will but believe it, a kind of moral artist. He has a plastic work to do—the work of moulding the rude untutored nature of peasant and city boyhood into a shapely form. Nor will any one regard this as an exaggeration of the teacher's office, who has had opportunities of contrasting the uncombed, untamed barbarian of civilisation, distinguished for his loose and insolent carriage, his lawless manner, licentious speech, and vagrant eye, with the same child, sitting on the school-bench, well habited and clean, his manner subdued into fitness with the moral order around him, his tongue under a sense of law, his countenance suffused with awakening thought—his very body seeming to be invested with reason. That such transformations are effected by the best Schoolmaster, all know who have come into direct personal contact with educational agencies. And surely the man who can point to such results as the product of his labour, rightly claims to have in some sense a creative function. Is not his work, in point of fact, creative in a high and peculiar sense? This at least is certain, that, except in so far as it is felt by him, consciously or unconsciously, to have this character, it may be safely said to be a drudgery the most dreary and soul tiring in the whole round of human labour—an occupation for slaves.

I speak exclusively of the elementary teacher; for the departmental instructor in this or that science or language stands on a lower moral eminence than that which is occupied by the parochial Schoolmaster. The former makes only a partial contribution to the final result of character, and he does so at an age when the pupils' unconscious moral tendencies are already declared, and the bent of his intelligence is already given. The latter, on the other hand, has to rear successive generations of children, during the years in which they are most open to impressions. These children he has, in the widest sense, to train as well as to instruct. His duty is to operate on their faculties and capacities, to stimulate these into life, and to give them their first direction. The intellect of the child is thus dependent on its earliest instructor more than on any other—on his wise understanding of the manner of its natural operations, the limits of its legitimate exercise, and the objects most readily seized and assimilated at the different stages of its growth. Still more is the moral destiny of the child in his hands; for the extent to which the sentiments and imaginations are to enter into the future character, and give it balance and harmony, depends more on the way in which they are respected and judiciously fostered in the child's earliest years, than on any future influences whatsoever.

If this be the work of the national Schoolmaster—if his function be to elaborate out of rude but not unpliant material, some approximation to a good intellectual and moral habit, how indispensable is it that he should be guided as well as sustained by the conscious possession of this the ideal aim of his profession! It is only when he has a clear comprehension of the real nature and the large bearings of his work, that the little things of the schoolroom—and it is precisely these that require his attention—assume their rightful importance. All the details of his arrangements are then felt to promote or retard the realization of the educative purpose of the school, and, in so far as they contribute to the final result, to have a moral value. Small things are no longer petty. Things which would be otherwise considered trivial—such as cleanliness, order, light, ventilation—acquire a new significance. Those daily incidents, so apt to be regarded as merely harassing and vexatious, and as traversing the steady onward progress of his work, are now beheld by him in a new light, and what were formerly only obstructions, become transmuted into auxiliaries of his general method, or into felicitous opportunities for applying it. The teacher, on the other hand, who is ignorant of the true nature of his function, and is unfurnished with a practical ideal, can at best take only a partial and technical view of his duties. His various classes and subjects