

THE DOCTRINE OF HANDICAPS.

BY JOHN LEWIS.

There is a doctrine preached which may be called the "advantage of disadvantages." It is constantly asserted that in the race of life, the man who is most heavily handicapped has the best chance of winning. In order to become a great merchant or banker or railway man it is almost necessary to begin life penniless and to serve an apprenticeship of running errands and sweeping floors. In order to have a fair show in the running for Prime Minister or President, it is advisable to shun the doors of colleges; graduates of these are doomed to be beaten by young men whose fathers could not afford to buy them books, and were obliged to send them to work at twelve years of age.

I do not deny that there is a germ of truth in these seeming paradoxes, and that what appears to be a disadvantage or even a calamity is sometimes turned into a blessing. An accident, let us say, deprives a young workman of a right arm: compels him, in the search for a means of livelihood, to develop faculties hitherto dormant: and thus he wins for himself a higher place than he would have attained but for that which came in the guise of a great misfortune. Naturally, the strange and romantic episode is much commented on: yet the common sense of mankind still regards mutilation as a calamity. For this one case there will be found perhaps ten where the accident has brought, not enhanced usefulness and honor, but usefulness destroyed or sadly impaired.

Here it is admitted at once that the one case is an exception: but it is not so clearly perceived that the cases are also exceptional where the disadvantages of poverty and a lack of

education have been overcome. So much is written about Dick Whittington, and the great scholars who studied painfully by firelight, that we are in danger of forgetting the plain, unromantic truth that the great body of professors, scholars and literary men have enjoyed all the advantages of schools and colleges, leisure, comfortable surroundings and cultured friends, and that a large proportion of the merchant princes of the world are men who have inherited their business and their wealth. There are conspicuous examples of American statesmen who have risen from poverty and drudgery to the governor's chair, the Senate and the White House: but it would be easy to collect a respectable array of great names of men in American public life who have been reared in affluence and with every advantage of education: and nearly all the great statesmen of England have been, and are, college-bred men.

Undoubtedly a training which makes for self-denial, industry and providence is good, and one which encourages self-indulgence is bad. The mistake is in supposing that the more wholesome training is always to be found in poverty and ignorance. The North American Indian, in his wild state, is poorly enough supplied with this world's goods, is often brought face to face with the stern realities of life, and is not unfrequently on the verge of starvation. But hunger, cold and poverty have failed to train him into industry, self-command or prudence, or even to give him as strong a frame as the more luxuriously bred white man. His fibre, moral, mental and physical, is no firmer than that of the savage in