

PROPERTY IN CHARACTER.

Discipline, properly speaking, should aim at making children obey, and obey cheerfully, in relation to matters on which their parents or teachers really know better what is good for them than they themselves do; in other words, it should aim wholly at the good of the child, and at the healthy development of its own character. But as a matter of fact, parents very often aim at something quite different. They feel towards the child as if it absolutely belonged to them, and as if their credit were concerned in making it evident to the world that it belongs to them, and answers to their word of command as instantaneously as a dog performs its little tricks when the word of command is given. Many parents regard their pride as deeply concerned in extorting from their children an exact correspondence to their signals, not merely when that is for the children's benefit, but whether, it be for their children's benefit or not, simply because it is gratifying to their own sense of property in the child to see it echo their minutest wishes. Just as a man takes the greatest pride in making his horse obey the slightest signal of the rein or whip, a father and mother will often take the utmost pride in making their children obey the most arbitrary orders, only because they give them, and because they look at the commandment, "Children, obey your parents," as one given for the glorification of the parents, and not for the advantage of the children.

Even schoolmasters and governesses sometimes fall into the same state of mind, and do not consider themselves good disciplinarians unless they can obtain instant obedience to orders given exclusively to test the subordination of their pupils, and not even devised for their good apart from discipline. Now, up to a certain point, of course, mere discipline is as essential in school and families as it is essential in any army. It is impossible for parents and teachers to be always complaining why this or that rule is made, and if a child will never obey until it understands why it is asked to obey, it will grow up without any of that pillancy to the control of superiors which is absolutely essential to the organisation even of a household, and much more to that of a school or a State. Discipline implies ready obedience to orders of which the reason is not understood; but it should always rest on the belief that these orders will be given for sufficient reasons, and not for the mere satisfaction of those who

give them in seeing them implicitly obeyed.

The first lesson a superior,—either in a family or a school or an army or a State,—has to learn, is that there is no such thing as property in the character of a human being; that when the individuality of a character has to be suppressed,—and of course the organisation of society requires that it must often be suppressed,—it is suppressed either for its own good or for the good of others to whom consideration is due, and that beyond the limits of these obligations, individuality, far from being a hindrance and annoyance to be got rid of as completely as possible, is a distinct gain to the universe. The wish of some parents to wield as much power over the wills and characters of their children, as they do over the motions of the horses they ride or drive, is not only a foolish but an evil wish. To get excellent instruments on which they can perform as they would perform on a piano, always eliciting exactly the particular vibration that they desire and expect, is clearly not the true object of family life. On the contrary, character, far from being an instrument to be performed upon by others, should always be a new source of life and originality, which no one should be able to govern despotically from outside, and which, even from inside, is in a great degree a mystery and a marvel to him who has most power over it.

The mere notion of making character a kind of repeater, which responds by a given number of strokes to the parent's touch, is a radically absurd one. What a parent ought to wish for is, indeed, instant obedience to orders given for the child's good, and an eager readiness in the child to trust its parent; but beyond this, as much that is distinct and individual, and that has a separate significance of its own, as the child's nature can provide. If there be an utterly mean and poverty-stricken type of parental ambition, it is to have children who shall be remarkable for nothing else than exactly corresponding to their parents' orders,—who shall be echoes of their wishes, products of their suggestion. Mr. Babbage's calculating machine was an offspring almost more interesting than such a child as that.

It is one of the most curious indications of the tendency of the instinct for property to become an overruling passion, that it should prove a temptation, and sometimes a very powerful temptation, to parents to make their children mere creatures for the gratification

of their own caprices. The secret of the temptation is, we suppose, a kind of petty ambition. Ambition of a higher kind loves to see its will regnant in the world at large. An ambitious orator delights in the power to thrill a great assembly with his own resolves and convictions. An ambitious statesman loves to see Kingdoms enforcing his wishes, and armies moving whenever he touches a spring; and so, we imagine, it is a sort of domestic ambition which delights to see children turned into mere executive agents for their father's or mother's volition, and multiplying, so to speak, the efficiency of that father's or mother's influence in the world. But that, surely, is a very perverted sort of parental ambition.

If character means anything great at all, it means something much more than a mere sounding-board for the character of others. The highest domestic ambition should aim at eliciting from the children of a family all the more perfect qualities and characteristics, which the Creator has implanted in their nature,—and this is an aim which cannot possibly be consistent with that other aim of turning them into mere obedient subordinates of a parental will. Such an ambition as that is even poorer than the ambition of a man of science who desires to find in the universe nothing new, nothing but a vast increase of the forces with the use and manipulation of which he is already familiar. For in the world of character we are in a field altogether higher than any with which the man of science deals, and what a parent may fairly look for in a child, is something infinitely fresher and more wonderful and fuller of inexplicable beauty, than anything of which the man of science attempts to measure the meaning. To desire to exercise the privileges of ownership over the character of another, is desiring to make it something infinitely less, infinitely poorer, than it was intended; because that means putting the very springs of one character in another character external to itself, which does not feel its inmost impulses, and cannot elicit from it, therefore, its highest powers.

A character in the keeping of another character is not a character at all; or, rather, it is a distorted character, a character twisted and diverted from its true purpose and significance. The passion for ownership is one which has no doubt a very legitimate place in human nature; but there is no passion which is more easily or more often exaggerated into an engrossing and debasing