

HABIT.

This tendency of the mind, however, to adapt itself to the objects with which it is familiarly conversant, may, in some instances, not only be a source of occasional suffering, but may disqualify us for relishing the best enjoyments which human life affords. The habits contracted during infancy and childhood are so much more inveterate than those of our maturer years, that they have been justly said to constitute a second nature; and if, unfortunately, they have been formed amidst circumstances over which we have no control, they leave us no security for our happiness but the caprice of fortune.

To habituate the minds of children to those occupations and enjoyments alone, which it is in the power of an individual at all times to command, is the most solid foundation that can be laid for their future tranquillity.—There, too, are the occupations and enjoyments which afford the most genuine and substantial satisfaction; and if education were judiciously employed to second in this respect the recommendations of nature, they might appropriate to themselves all the borrowed charms which the vanities of the world derive from casual associations.

With respect to pursuits which depend, in the first instance, on our own choice, it is of the last importance for us to keep constantly in view how much of the happiness of mankind arises from habit, and in the formation of our plans to disregard those prepossessions and prejudices which so often warp the judgment in the conduct of life. "Choose that course of action," said Pythagoras, "which is best, and custom will soon render it the most agreeable."

To these very slight hints concerning the regulation of the habits, I shall add a few observations of Dr Paley's which appear to me to be solid and judicious, and which afford a favourable specimen of that talent for familiar and happy illustration for which this very popular writer has been so justly celebrated.

"The art in which the secret of human happiness in a great measure consists, is to set the habits in such a manner that every change may be a change for the better. The habits themselves are much the same; for whatever is made habitual becomes smooth, and easy and nearly indifferent." The return to an old habit is likewise easy, whatever the habit be. Therefore the advantage is with those habits which allow of indulgence in the deviation from them. The luxurious receive no greater pleasure from their dainties, than the peasant does from his bread and cheese; but the peasant whenever he goes abroad finds a feast, whereas the Epicure must be well entertained to escape disgust. Those who spend every day at cards, and those who go every day to plough, pass their time much alike; intent upon what they are about, wanting nothing, regretting nothing, they are both for the time in a state of ease; but then whatever suspends the occupation of the card-player distresses him; whereas to the labourer, every interruption is a refreshment; and this appears in the different effect that Sunday produces on the two, which proves a day of recreation to the one, but a lamentable burden to the other.—The man who has learned to live alone feels his spirits enlivened whenever he enters into company, and takes his leave without regret. Another who has long been accustomed to a crowd, experiences in company no elevation of spirits, nor any greater satisfaction than what the man of a retired life finds in his chimney-corner. So far their conditions are equal; but let a change of place, fortune or

situation, separate the companion from his circle, his visitors, his club, common-room, or coffee-house, and the difference of advantage in the choice and constitution of the two habits will show itself. Solitude comes to the one clothed with melancholy; to the other it brings liberty and quiet. You will see the one fretful and restless; at a loss how to dispose of his time till the hour come round that he can forget himself in bed; the other easy and satisfied, taking up his book or his pipe as soon as he finds himself alone; ready to admit any little amusement that casts up, or turns his hands and attention to the first business that presents itself; or, content without either, to sit still and let his trains of thought glide indolently through his brain, without much use, perhaps, or pleasure, but without hankering after anything better, and without irritation. A reader who has injured himself to books of science and argumentation, if a novel, a well written pamphlet, an article of news, a narrative of a curious voyage, or the journal of a traveller comes in his way, sits down to the report with relish; enjoys his entertainment while it lasts, and can return when it is over to his graver reading without distaste. Another, with whom nothing will go down but works of humour and pleasantry, or whose curiosity must be interested by perpetual novelty, will consume a bookseller's window in half a forenoon, during which time he is rather in search of diversion than diverted, and as books to his taste are few and short, and rapidly read over, the stock is soon exhausted, when he is left without resource from this principal supply of harmless amusement."

As a supplement to the remarks of Paley, I shall quote a short passage from Montaigne containing an observation relative to the same subject, which, although stated in a form rather unqualified, seems to me highly worthy of attention. "We must not rivet ourselves so fast to our humours and complexions. Our chief business is to know how to apply ourselves to various customs.—For a man to keep himself tied and bound by necessity to one only course, is but bare existence not living. It was an honourable character of the elder Cato, 'So versatile' was his genius, that whatever he took in hand, you would be apt to say that he was formed for that very thing only." Were I to choose for myself, there is no fashion so good that I should care to be so wedded to it as not to have it in my power to disengage myself from it. Life is a motion, uneven, irregular, and ever varying its direction. A man is not his own friend, much less his own master, but rather a slave to himself, who is eternally pursuing his own humour, and such a bigot to his inclinations, that he is not able to abandon or to alter them."

The only thing to be censured in this passage is, that the author makes no distinction between good and bad habits; between those which we are induced to cultivate by reason, and by the original principles of our nature; and those which reason admonishes us to shun, on account of the mischievous consequences with which they are likely to be followed. With respect to these two classes of habits considered in contrast with each other, it is extremely worthy of observation, that the former are incomparably more easy in the acquisition than the latter; while the latter, when once acquired, are (probably, in consequence of this very circumstance, the difficulty overcoming our natural propensities) of at least equal efficacy in subjecting all the powers of the will to their dominion.

That such habits as are reasonable and agreeable to nature are more easily acquired

than others of a contrary description, is an old and common remark. It is well expressed, and very happily illustrated in the following passage of Quintilian: "The discipline of a virtuous and happy life is short and easy, nature having formed us for whatever is excellent, and having so facilitated to a willing mind every acquisition which tends to its improvement, as to render it wonderful that vice should be so prevalent in the world.—For as to fishes water is the appropriate element; to terrestrial animals the dry land; and to birds the surrounding atmosphere: so to man it is certainly more easy to follow the suggestions of Nature than to pursue a plan of life contrary to her obvious intentions and arrangements."

Of the peculiar difficulty of shaking off inveterate habits, as were at first the most repugnant to our taste and inclinations, we have a daily and a melancholy proof in the case of those individuals who have suffered themselves to become slaves to tobacco, to opium, and to other intoxicating drugs, which, so far from possessing the attractions of pleasurable sensations, are in a great degree revolting to an uninvited palate. The same thing is exemplified in many of those acquired tastes which it is the great object of the art of cookery to create and to gratify; and still more remarkably in those fatal habits which sometimes steal on the most amiable characters, under the seducing form of social enjoyment, and of a temporary respite from the evils of life.

I am inclined, however, to think that Montaigne meant to restrict his observations chiefly, if not solely, to habits which are indifferent or nearly indifferent in their moral tendency, and that all he is to be understood as asserting amounts to this, that we ought not, in matters connected with the accommodations of human life, to enslave ourselves to one set of habits in preference to another. In this sense his doctrine is just and important; and I have only to add to it, that in this point of view also virtuous habits possess a distinguished superiority not only over those which are immoral, but over those which are merely innocent and inoffensive, inasmuch as they lead us to associate the idea of happiness with objects which depend infinitely less than any others on the caprice of fortune, or rather with such as every wise and prudent man has it in his power at all times to enjoy.—(From Dugald Stewart on the "Active and Moral Powers of Man.")

THE SPONGE TRADE.—The sponge business has become a prominent department of industry in the Bahama Islands. It is almost entirely the growth of the last twenty years, and nets annually about 20,000 dollars. The sponge is fished and raked from the sandy bottom of the ocean, at a depth of twenty, forty, or sixty feet. It belongs to a very low order of animal life, organization being hardly detected. When first taken from the water it is black, and becomes exceedingly offensive from decomposition. It is so poisonous in this condition that it almost blisters the flesh it happens to touch. The first process is to bury it in the sand, where it remains for two or three weeks, in which time the gelatinous animal matter is absorbed and destroyed by the insects that swarm in the sand. After being cleaned it is compressed and packed in bales like cotton. The sponge has been applied to a variety of new purposes, and within the past few years has quadrupled in value.—*West India paper.*