

PLUTARCH'S MORALS.

A DISCOURSE TOUCHING THE TRAINING OF CHILDREN.

1. THE course which ought to be taken for the training of free-born children, and the means whereby their manners may be rendered virtuous, will, with the reader's leave, be the subject of our present disquisition.

2. In the management of which, perhaps it may be expedient to take our rise from their very procreation. I would therefore, in the first place, advise those who desire to become the parents of famous and eminent children, that they keep not company with all women that they light on; I mean such as harlots, or concubines. For such children as are blemished in their birth, either by the father's or the mother's side, are liable to be pursued, as long as they live, with the indelible infamy of their base extraction, as that which offers a ready occasion to all that desire to take hold of it of reproaching and disgracing them therewith. So that it was a wise speech of the poet who said, —

Misfortune on that family's entailed,
Whose reputation in its founder failed.*

Wherefore, since to be well born gives men a good stock of confidence, the consideration hereof ought to be of no small value to such as desire to leave behind them a lawful issue. For the spirits of men who are alloyed and

* Eurip. Hercules Furens, 1261

counterfeit in their birth are naturally enfeebled and debased; as rightly said the poet again, —

A bold and daring spirit is often daunted,
When with the guilt of parents' crimes 'tis haunted.*

So, on the contrary, a certain loftiness and natural gallantry of spirit is wont to fill the breasts of those who are born of illustrious parents. Of which Diophantus, the young son of Themistocles, is a notable instance; for he is reported to have made his boast often and in many companies, that whatsoever pleased him pleased also all Athens for whatever he liked, his mother liked; and whatever his mother liked, Themistocles liked; and whatever Themistocles liked, all the Athenians liked. Wherefore it was gallantly done of the Lacedaemonian States, when they laid a round fine on their king Archidamus for marrying a little woman, giving this reason for their so doing: that he meant to beget for them not kings, but kinglings.

3. The advice which I am, in the next place, about to give, is, indeed, no other than what hath been given by those who have undertaken this argument before me. You will ask me what is that? It is this: that no man keep company with his wife for issue's sake but when he is sober, having drunk either no wine, or at least not such a quantity as to distemper him; for they usually prove wine-bibbers and drunkards, whose parents begot them when they were drunk. Wherefore Diogenes said to a stripling somewhat crack-brained and half-witted: Surely, young man, thy father begot thee when he was drunk. Let this suffice to be spoken concerning the procreation of children: and let us pass thence to their education.

4. And here, to speak summarily, what we are wont to say of arts and sciences may be said also concerning virtue: that there is a concurrence of three things requisite to the

* Eurip. Hippol. 424.

completing thereof in practice, — which are nature, reason, and use. Now by reason here I would be understood to mean learning; and by use, exercise. Now the principles come from instruction, the practice comes from exercise, and perfection from all three combined. And accordingly as either of the three is deficient, virtue must needs be defective. For if nature be not improved by instruction, it is blind; if instruction be not assisted by nature, it is maimed; and if exercise fail of the assistance of both, it is imperfect as to the attainment of its end. And as in husbandry it is first requisite that the soil be fertile, next that the husbandman be skilful, and lastly that the seed he sows be good; so here nature resembles the soil, the instructor of youth the husbandman, and the rational principles and precepts which are taught, the seed. And I would peremptorily affirm that all these met and jointly conspired to the completing of the souls of those universally celebrated men, Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato, together with all others whose eminent worth hath gotten them immortal glory. And happy is that man certainly, and well-beloved of the Gods, on whom by the bounty of any of them all these are conferred.

And yet if any one thinks that those in whom Nature hath not thoroughly done her part may not in some measure make up her defects, if they be so happy as to light upon good teaching, and withal apply their own industry towards the attainment of virtue, he is to know that he is very much, nay, altogether, mistaken. For as a good natural capacity may be impaired by slothfulness, so dull and heavy natural parts may be improved by instruction; and whereas negligent students arrive not at the capacity of understanding the most easy things, those who are industrious conquer the greatest difficulties. And many instances we may observe, that give us a clear demonstration of the mighty force and successful efficacy of labor and indus-

try. For water continually dropping will wear hard rocks hollow; yea, iron and brass are worn out with constant handling. Nor can we, if we would, reduce the felloes of a cart-wheel to their former straightness, when once they have been bent by force; yea, it is above the power of force to straighten the bended staves sometimes used by actors upon the stage. So far is that which labor effects, though against nature, more potent than what is produced according to it. Yea, have we not many millions of instances more which evidence the force of industry? Let us see in some few that follow. A man's ground is of itself good; yet, if it be unmanured, it will contract barrenness; and the better it was naturally, so much the more is it ruined by carelessness, if it be ill-husbanded. On the other side, let a man's ground be more than ordinarily rough and rugged; yet experience tells us that, if it be well manured, it will be quickly made capable of bearing excellent fruit. Yea, what sort of tree is there which will not, if neglected, grow crooked and unfruitful; and what but will, if rightly ordered, prove fruitful and bring its fruit to maturity? What strength of body is there which will not lose its vigor and fall to decay by laziness, nice usage, and debauchery? And, on the contrary, where is the man of never so crazy a natural constitution, who cannot render himself far more robust, if he will only give himself to exercises of activity and strength? What horse well managed from a colt proves not easily governable by the rider? And where is there one to be found which, if not broken betimes, proves not stiff-necked and unmanageable? Yea, why need we wonder at any thing else when we see the wildest beasts made tame and brought to hand by industry? And lastly, as to men themselves, that Thessalian answered not amiss, who, being asked which of his countrymen were the meekest, replied: Those that have received their discharge from the wars.

But what need of multiplying more words in this matter, when even the notion of the word *ῥῆθος* in the Greek language imports continuance, and he that should call moral virtues customary virtues would seem to speak not incongruously? I shall conclude this part of my discourse, therefore, with the addition of one only instance. Lycurgus, the Lacedaemonian lawgiver, once took two whelps of the same litter, and ordered them to be bred in a quite different manner; whereby the one became dainty and ravenous, and the other of a good scent and skilled in hunting; which done, a while after he took occasion thence in an assembly of the Lacedaemonians to discourse in this manner. Of great weight in the attainment of virtue, fellow-citizens, are habits, instruction, precepts, and indeed the whole manner of life, — as I will presently let you see by example. And, withal, he ordered the producing those two whelps into the midst of the hall, where also there were set down before them a plate and a live hare. Whereupon, as they had been bred, the one presently flies upon the hare, and the other as greedily runs to the plate. And while the people were musing, not perfectly apprehending what he meant by producing those whelps thus, he added: These whelps were both of one litter, but differently bred; the one, you see, has turned out a greedy cur, and the other a good hound. And this shall suffice to be spoken concerning custom and different ways of living.

5. The next thing that falls under our consideration is the nursing of children, which, in my judgment, the mothers should do themselves, giving their own breasts to those they have borne. For this office will certainly be performed with more tenderness and carefulness by natural mothers, who will love their children intimately, as the saying is, from their tender nails.* Whereas, both wet and dry nurses, who are hired, love only for their pay,

* Ἐξ ὀνύχων ἀπαλῶν.

and are affected to their work as ordinarily those that are substituted and deputed in the place of others are. Yea, even Nature seems to have assigned the suckling and nursing of the issue to those that bear them ; for which cause she hath bestowed upon every living creature that brings forth young, milk to nourish them withal. And, in conformity thereto, Providence hath also wisely ordered that women should have two breasts, that so, if any of them should happen to bear twins, they might have two several springs of nourishment ready for them. Though, if they had not that furniture, mothers would still be more kind and loving to their own children. And that not without reason ; for constant feeding together is a great means to heighten the affection mutually betwixt any persons. Yea, even beasts, when they are separated from those that have grazed with them, do in their way show a longing for the absent. Wherefore, as I have said, mothers themselves should strive to the utmost to nurse their own children. But if they find it impossible to do it themselves, either because of bodily weakness (and such a case may fall out), or because they are apt to be quickly with child again, then are they to chose the honestest nurses they can get, and not to take whomsoever they have offered them. And the first thing to be looked after in this choice is, that the nurses be bred after the Greek fashion. For as it is needful that the members of children be shaped aright as soon as they are born, that they may not afterwards prove crooked and distorted, so it is no less expedient that their manners be well fashioned from the very beginning. For childhood is a tender thing, and easily wrought into any shape. Yea, and the very souls of children readily receive the impressions of those things that are dropped into them while they are yet but soft ; but when they grow older, they will, as all hard things are, be more difficult to be wrought upon. And as soft wax is apt to take the stamp of the seal, so are the

minds of children to receive the instructions imprinted on them at that age. Whence, also, it seems to me good advice which divine Plato gives to nurses, not to tell all sorts of common tales to children in infancy, lest thereby their minds should chance to be filled with foolish and corrupt notions.* The like good counsel Phocylides, the poet, seems to give in this verse of his: —

If we'll have virtuous children, we should choose
Their tenderest age good principles to infuse.

6. Nor are we to omit taking due care, in the first place, that those children who are appointed to attend upon such young nurslings, and to be bred with them for play-fellows, be well-mannered, and next that they speak plain, natural Greek; lest, being constantly used to converse with persons of a barbarous language and evil manners, they receive corrupt tinctures from them. For it is a true proverb, that if you live with a lame man, you will learn to halt.

7. Next, when a child is arrived at such an age as to be put under the care of pedagogues, great care is to be used that we be not deceived in them, and so commit our children to slaves or barbarians or cheating fellows. For it is a course never enough to be laughed at which many men nowadays take in this affair; for if any of their servants be better than the rest, they dispose some of them to follow husbandry, some to navigation, some to merchandise, some to be stewards in their houses, and some, lastly, to put out their money to use for them. But if they find any slave that is a drunkard or a glutton, and unfit for any other business, to him they assign the government of their children; whereas, a good pedagogue ought to be such a one in his disposition as Phoenix, tutor to Achilles, was.

And now I come to speak of that which is a greater matter, and of more concern than any that I have said.

* See Plato, *Repub.* II. p. 377 C.

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