

ENVIRONMENT AND CHARACTER

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OCCASIONALLY we find our lives grown narrowed and miserable with the weary monotony of mediocre and mercenary days. We feel oppressed and broken; and our faculties, so long left hungry and athirst, are parched and atrophied, feeble and forlorn. Our captive souls are rendered crude and stupid, and seem no more alert to sense the scruples of nobility and regeneration. This condition is always housed about the negative pole of our spirit's vital current where strength is lost and no recharging function is performed. It is the broken rudder on our private yachts and sets our souls adrift to meet whatever fate may happen to befall. A tragedy indeed is put upon the stage of Life to play with Death's dramatic score; and those who foolishly rehearse the lines or neglect their proper study will still be required to take part in the actual and ultimate presentation.

This is a figure on the daily dial of Man's Triune Transfiguration; that great heroic venture where he needs must exercise in proper function every power and faculty of his being, where head and heart and hand must work in noble unison and not desert the job nor run counter to each other. Great jubilees oftener entertained than those attending passage through the quarter-century gate, the supreme felicity of new horizons opening up, the sacred moment of spiritual insight into things divine—all these cheer and animate that goodly company of days which mark the slow progress of man's redemption from bestiality to beatitude. It is more often narrow selfishness and pleasure-seeking than actual sin or mischief which lose man his title to ineffable Paradise; tribulation and dependency more often than shallow pastimes, swallow up the feeble soul that falls into folly's fen while blindly groping among the dismal grottoes of the cynic's petty world; umbrage and fault-finding, more often than any actual peccadillo, make up the proprium of the pessimist.

Many careers and many people seeking careers have suffered irrevocable loss through sheer ignorance of Life's spiritual alphabet. They shallowly think that matter and mind make up the Cosmos and of the two, so far as they are concerned, matter offers the more immediate and tangible explanation of life's strange paradox. Beyond this they seek little excuse for being here at all, laying all the burden of apology on those more adept at sophist alibis and casuistic justification. Both they and their mercenary apologists are wise worldlings perhaps, but weak morally and given more to ephemeral gain or fleeting pleasure than to heroic sacrifice and deeds of spiritual valor. They little dream that God's World, the great Universe beyond their petty rhyomistic circle, is more lovely and profound, a vaster empire of things immortal and divine, a joyous panorama never clearly visioned except through generous service, clear-minded aims and loyal devotion to maintaining righteousness. Few people know from any actual experience that the human soul has a divine heritage and potentiality. They seem quite unmindful of any fancy for innocence and joy, quite estranged from any far-reaching decision for the Good-of-All, ready enough to take an imbecile pleasure in foolish pastimes, but never so much as half alive to what God intended them to be. No wonder then that the crude tasks of bare livelihood, the bludgeonings of chance or the arbitrary prestige of more or less precarious circumstance, so easily dominate their lives and leave them only a few idle hours every day in which to grasp desperately after this or that narcotic under whose soothing influence they can forget their misery for a while. And no sober man, I hope, doubts for a minute that *all* our narcotics and anaesthetics are innocent chemical products. Pleasure-seeking, luxury, idleness, gossip, unearned livelihood and all the other false credentials of hedonism are fully as deadly and soul-destroying as the dope-habit.

In view of this situation I feel sorry for the prattling parvenu who knows no world but that of barren daily toil, his feeble intellect counselling nothing but some desperate manner of release, who acts and thinks in little lugubrious circles around his private individual peg, unseeing and uncaring for the vaster Universe beyond. There is an eternal antithesis, often bordering on the rigid terms of conflict, between the fool and the sage, the debauchee and the saint, between those whose whole practice and program of life is hedonistic and those who would rather seek their happiness in attending to worthier causes whether or not they minister to private

ends. Although the immediate psychological terms of this conflict should properly be read in the way environment affects character (or the way man's inward life meets external conditions, as the case may be, for some people do and some don't admit that the environment is there first so far as each one of us is individually concerned), many writers choose to vary the terminology, calling the two members by such terms as modern civilization versus personal culture, worldliness versus spirituality, industrialism versus romanticism, or public success as against private happiness. But howsoever we label the chief applications of the conflict, the various theatres of war so to speak, the essential distinction and opposition of forces behind the scene of carnage is the same regardless of how we describe or analyze them. The truly elect are those who see this distinction, this vital antithesis, and have the courage and energy and intelligence to champion its proper decision, knowing only too honestly well that the noblest in human life can be achieved only through a mortal conflict between man's environment and man's character—a cultural *combat a outrance*, indeed! And woe be unto the man who fails to conquer *some* part at least of his environment, for his grasp of life is of a certainty feeble and insignificant.

Let us look at these two perennial adversaries a little more closely. Environment is just those surrounding conditions and influences which tend to cause a person to act or grow a certain way. In its largest proportion it may be primarily one's work, one's home life, companions or neighbors, and all that these may do or say to affect, either directly or indirectly, one's manner of living, thinking and moral tendency; the influence of prenatal prayers, astrological signs and karmic destinies usually being in very minor proportion, even with many of those who hold them paramount in the decisions of human fate. It is proverbial that a poor or adverse environment is one of the foul obstacles to soul development, while a congenial and righteous environment has a beneficent value which is seldom given its proper estimate and credit. Wherever you find a person turning adverse external circumstance to noble advantage you will also find a person who is already well developed in virtue and power of character. He has will and genius sufficient for the fight, and the despotism of circumstance cannot bear him down.

By synecdoche from aversion and affection in our emotional nature we have come to give environment a dual analysis, saying that it is made up of both adverse and benign characteristics, that it has both evil and noble tendencies which qualify accordingly the

human character that is exposed to one or the other system of influences. Under the first aspect it may be the discouraging drudgery of a misfit occupation; it may be an atmosphere of pride, vexation, wrangling and selfishness at home; mischievous or slothful companions; envious, slanderous or belligerent neighbors; or whatnot of a thousand other despicable and enervating items of negative and baneful influence. These are among the most noxious, although by no means the most subtle or deadly, of the Devil's tools of moral destruction; they alone could account for the major portion of our criminals and social misfits. But fortunately there is a certain sort of environment which has a more agreeable pattern. It is so constituted as to exercise a more pure and benign influence on all whom its affections can reach. But I recognize that its modes are invariably the opposites of those which characterize adverse surroundings. A benign atmosphere is a more economical condition of life than one which is angular and malevolent, and it certainly accommodates that rare peace of mind which is so essential to happiness. However, we seldom find our surroundings totally of one or the other disposition; outside of chemistry and theology there seems to be no pure quality of either good or bad tendency. Instead (and to take an instance in a popular subject) we find that "romance is dead after the honeymoon is over" because neither environment nor human nature can hold a smiling face when adverse situations arise. It is also noteworthy that the romantic and utilitarian moralists just about match one for one in their analysis of human motives, and that the artistic and the domestic viewpoints just about balance in the numerous arguments, criticisms and replies grouped together in Elinor Glyn's symposium on love and marriage conducted by the *Photoplay* magazine four years ago. Such is a fair sample of our conception of environment; for in married life I believe that nearly every phase of dual characteristic may be found, and nearly every one of these will match with some similar phase in the general environment of everyone's life.

Character, on the other hand, is that inner frame which keeps a man erect and true in face of ridicule and jealousy, petty rivalries and hate, and supports him against external adversity so that he is not shaken by the mad stampede of wickedness or the panic-stricken mob in open revolt. It means that there has been a positive development of the inner life, that the harder and more durable mettle of wisdom and virtue has been fused among the meeker atoms of one's soul and it is rendered more astute and noble thereby. Quite

unlike environment, character has no dual aspect. It either is or is not. A person either has character or lacks character, that is all we can say. There are, however, certain degrees of nobility or strength of character, just as there are certain degrees of merit and default in one's conduct or environment. Thus a person's character may be such a measure of the divine as to be sympathetic and consoling, durable and exemplary, and yet run more to private retirement than public anxiety. Such a one may be almost wholly given over to the all-suffering patience of helpfulness and generosity, and yet feel duty-bound to withdraw betimes to the quiet hermitage of far-off dreams and visions of the overworld. And again, one's character may be finely tuned and hence be easily put into discord by the jar of private passion and the warp of public mediocrity or debauchery. Many a saint and hero has had to wage fully as stern a war within as without: very few of us for that matter are so fortunate as to have our private economy so efficiently arranged that no conflict or perturbing influence ever reaches our spirit's tranquil refuge.

No one is much inspired by taudry, cheap or vulgar example; nor are we much enthused by vicarious realizations of ambitions similar to our own if they are achieved only through some form of falsehood and selfish aggression. No good art can be produced even on an amateurish scale except on terms of regular effort, quiet leisure and congeniality of artistic surroundings. Mere patience or fortitude to undergo all sorts of unpleasant conditions and experiences is not enough; there must also be genius and inspiration, original conception and intelligent expression. On this point witness MacDowell up in the New Hampshire hills composing his "Woodland Sketches," with pines and hemlocks, wild rose and artemisia, departed Indians and contemporary trappers blended into romantic melody. Witness Sidonie Springer, the German war-time artist, whose strange paintings were recently exhibited at Munich. Among them were powerful canvas sermons on the vandalism and brutality of man, two portrayals especially depicting first ("An Unmarried Mother") despondency's only solace drinking the Cup of Death, and second ("Uprooted") showing humanity floundering through the darkening fog, torn away from its foundations of morality and culture by the error, viciousness and sorrow of war.

Therefore, in view of these and many other composite items, I like to think of environment and character as not always in mutual revolt, although they may very often appear at mortal grips with

each other. In any event, however, they make up no sham dilemma for each is a hard and incorrigible element in the constitution of the world. They can in some few fortunate souls be made somewhat reciprocal and complementary in aim, each seeking to advance and ennoble the other. Hence, whether or not we can count ourselves blessed by such good fortune, we have not really lived in vain if, after surviving the wreck of circumstance and woe, we turn and lend a hand to those still struggling to cast off the yoke of error and spiritual limitation. That is to occasionally *be* what the untrammelled spirit of man has always aimed to become: a force of character that is strong enough to weather the worldly storm, and forward-looking enough to anticipate and prepare for the morrow's Dawn.