

## ARTICLE IX.

## THE PLACE OF THE CONVENTIONAL IN MORALS.

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AMONG the various baccalaureate and commencement addresses, which this year have dealt to a rather unusual extent with public morals, that of President Hadley has attracted marked attention. The newspapers have praised it as the deliverance of a "layman," unmindful that that is a term used often to indicate that a man is dealing with matters in which he is without technical training.

His subject was the importance of a morality that lies outside of, and goes beyond, the conventional. Young men in college, as in life, constantly are called to face new forms of temptation which are not specifically covered by the thou-shalt-nots of their home training. As a consequence, they are frequently maintaining what may be called their conventional good habits and virtues, while at the same time doing things that are wrong, and that with consciences little disturbed. They have good habits and bad morals; they belong to the race of religious hypocrites, with which just now the world is peculiarly cursed.

So far the word is well spoken. The question arises when one comes to the line of positive teaching. Whether it is intended or not, the address disparages conventional training. The emphasis is upon what may be called an original, or spontaneous, virtue, which is set over against and exalted above the other. This contrast surely is unnecessary and misleading.

The moral training of our childhood and the religious habits of the early home can hardly be regarded as the yoke under which any man is groaning to-day. On the contrary, the burden of proof is so completely shifted, that a man who retains his early habits has continually to justify himself. One can hardly take a step from the home door without discovering that the world has departed far from them. A careful search would be needed to find a public man of whom it could be said, as was said in high praise of President Garfield, that with all his greatness he had never separated himself from the obscure religious denomination to which his parents belonged, nor abandoned their simple ways. The other day Sidney Low applied to the late W. E. Henley in loving praise the words of Sainte Beuve, which Henley had previously applied to Matthew Arnold, *se vanter d'être resté fidèle à soi même, à son premier et à son plus beau passé*. These students of their times regard that sort of virtue as notably rare; it certainly is not to be disparaged or even overshadowed by terming it conventional, or contrasting it with something newer and more spontaneous.

May not the goal be reached in a better and surer way? Instead of disparaging the conventional, suppose we extend its scope. What difficulty is there in recognizing the worth of every moral or religious habit because it is a habit, and extending the teaching that gave rise to it to embrace the new situations and the new temptations that from time to time appear? New habits thus grow up alongside the old ones, gaining from them the strength that comes "where purposes are" not "lightly changed."

Conventional goodness ordinarily means external goodness. We associate it with an artificial society. "In courts," said Lord Chesterfield, "you may expect to find connections with-

out friendships, enmities without hatred, honor without virtue, appearance saved and realities sacrificed, good manners and bad morals." But that does not prove that a highly developed human society with its conventional ways that extend to every department of life and thought is not in the line of human progress.

The fact is that, paradoxical as it appears, the conventional is the line both of freedom and of progress. It is conventional to turn to the right, instead of the left, to keep the hair cut to a certain length, to wear evening dress at certain hours, to treat women with a certain formal deference; therefore men are free to pursue their way unimpeded, and to give their minds to other things. In the same way, and for the same reason, we acquire and are taught certain judgments and courses of conduct which become our habits; they are conventional, not simply as being our custom, but as being also the custom of those with whom we associate. As President Butler said in his commencement address at Columbia, we all need to be taught not only to think for ourselves, but also to think as other people think, so that the conduct which is the outcome of our thinking will accord with the conduct of those about us, and that we may the more readily and more surely take our part in the common life. Only so is human society possible; and it need not be argued that, with all its limitations and artificialities, society is better than barbarism, and the civilized man is freer than his uncivilized neighbor.

If any one is in doubt as to the validity of this line of thought, let him consider that the most conventional of all men is the gentleman. He is recognized by those most remote from him, and who understand him least, by certain things he does. He dresses in a certain manner, he carries certain equipment, he cares for his person with certain

habits, he disports himself in a certain fashion, he has a certain courtesy to others, especially his inferiors. In every relation he shows the result of a training he has accepted; he manifestly belongs to a certain class or status of society which he feels it incumbent upon him always to represent. He is a gentleman as much among the cowboys of Arizona or the hillmen of India, as he is in the parlors of New York or the clubs of London.

And there is something in a gentleman that is not to be found in other men. Catalogue his qualities, and you may match them anywhere: his courage, his courtesy, his devotion to duty, his honor, his self-control, his integrity, his chivalry to woman,—these may be found among the lowliest; yet he is something more than merely a man of the *gens*. He is a gentleman, not because of his birth, so much as because of his training. He has been brought up among conventions of the most rigorous kind. He has the habits of a gentleman; and if he has these in addition to the qualities of a true man, he has something that men not similarly bred have not. That something pertains to his inmost being. So well recognized is its value that Lord Erskine said a century ago of England, "It is impossible to define in terms the proper feelings of a gentleman, but their existence has supported the country for many ages, and she might perish if they were lost."

Now the gentleman is characteristically the man of conventionalities. They extend to everything he does, his morals and his thoughts no less than his manners and his clothes. These do not make him a gentleman, or keep him so, if he is at heart unsound; but they make it vastly easier for him to live up to his ideals, and to what is properly expected of him, if he desires to do so.

When, therefore, the question is raised, how young men may

be helped to meet new forms of temptations, it would seem that the true course is to fall back upon the validity of habits in which they have been established, and principles the virtue of which they were taught in childhood, only widening their application while emphasizing their value.

To lay stress upon the contrast between the new conditions and those out of which they have come, and a consequent necessity of new habits and new virtues, is to cut the ground out from beneath all moral strength. It is to press a man into conditions in which new conventions maintain, and are indispensable, while destroying his belief in the value of all that is conventional.

It is true that the new forces of the college and the street are strong beyond his experience; but, as President Eliot told the Labor Unions, "The forces of society which seem so strong, often turn out to be weak when confronted by men who believe with all their hearts in true ideals of freedom and righteousness."

The young man who has brought nothing more from his home than the fear of being regarded as "tied to his mother's apron-strings," will need something stronger to hold him true in the maelstrom of the life of the world, in whatever circumstances he encounters it, than exhortation to practise a new kind of virtue. While the fellow who has settled habits that are the expression of what has become in him a second nature, will need only to meet new forms of temptation to discover how promptly the momentum of right habit sweeps them aside until right reason has time to examine them and marshal moral principle to insure their permanent defeat.

Nathaniel Hawthorne records in his Note-Book how startled he was, on first landing in England, to find the force with which temptation assailed him in Liverpool. "Woe to

the man," he says, " who, finding himself in a strange country, has a loose bolt in the cage in which he has the devil within him fastened up. The devil knows that opportunity, and goes from bar to bar shaking every one." The point to be observed is that it is always the same devil; and the best guaranty for his present control, however new and strange the surroundings, is the fixedness of the old restraints. The men who are beguiled by gambling and drink and the strange woman, like those in later life who betray trusts and take advantage of positions of power to enrich themselves dishonestly, did not need a new kind of virtue either in its application or in its origin, they only needed to hold on a good deal more firmly to that which they already knew. Like the illiterate monk in the early days who persistently declined to be taught another text from Scripture, because he had not yet mastered the single one he had been taught, " I will take heed unto my ways, that I sin not with my tongue "; they do not need an eleventh or twelfth Commandment; the original Ten are not adequately learned.

The new virtues for which to-day there is so much clamor, and with much show of reason, are not unlike the young trees with which, here and there, gentlemen are seen adorning their newly purchased bare hills and abandoned farms which they are transforming into country places. The trees do not differ from the sturdy ones that may be found in the forest in abundance. They once grew on these barren fields, and need only to be given a chance to flourish again. The beautiful maple and stately elm, the wide branching chestnut and the fruitful orchard on many an adjoining homestead are eloquent witness that the old manner of life has not altogether departed. The discrediting of homely habits is akin to the pessimism that deplores the decay of general society. As Burke said of the state, " I am well aware that the age is not what we all wish,

but I am sure that the only means to check its degeneracy is heartily to concur in whatever is best in our time"; so with our young people going out in life, their surest course is to hold fast the habits that pertain to character, and to practise the homely virtues they have already acquired. Relaxing them is that ungirding of the loins that invites defeat.

It is possible to go still further in defense of conventional virtue, quite apart from the question of how much of thought or personal conviction there is in it. It has consistency, and therefore a beauty and a value, of its own. There is a passage from Richard Henry Dana, Sr., quoted in Senator Hoar's Autobiography, which runs as follows: "There is no virtue without a characteristic beauty. To do what is right argues superior taste, as well as morals; and those whose practice is evil feel an inferiority of intellectual power and enjoyment, even where they take no concern for a principle. Doing well has something more in it than the fulfilling of a duty. It is a cause of a just sense of elevation of character; it clears and strengthens the spirits; it gives higher reaches of thought. The world is sensible of these truths, let it act as it may. It is not because of his integrity alone that it relies on an honest man, but it has more confidence in his judgment and wise conduct in the long run, than in the schemes of those of greater intellect who go at large without any landmarks of principle. So that virtue seems of a double nature, and to stand oftentimes in the place of what we call talent."

This beauty of conduct which has such peculiar charm, and inspires confidence, and counts for talent, what is it but the outcome of established habit? It is a conventionalism of conduct that is rigid because it is fashioned upon a view of life as large as the world within which it has moved. Within that world it has tested itself in all relations, and has established

the consistency that is beauty. When the time comes to pass into the larger world outside, it already knows, with Horace, that "he who crosses seas changes climate, not mind." To his own self he must be true, and there is already a self, known and read of all men, a self that, in the larger world as in the smaller, is capital and has power :

"And the soul that can  
Render an honest and a perfect man,  
Commands all life, all influence, all fate."

That man needs only to be what he is. Not merely his judgments, but his habits,—his conventionalities, if you will,—become the pattern and the rule for those about him. If the unchanged moustache and imperial of the Emperor Napoleon III. survives in the French army to-day, who will doubt that the hour of daily prayer of Charles Gordon, and Havelock, and Stonewall Jackson made it easier for others to pray, as Grant's undeviating rule to refuse to listen to a dirty story did much to keep his camp clean? Both the morals and the manners of two recent classes at Yale have been largely determined by the opinions and the bearing of a single man of high character and positive convictions in each case.

The Italians have a saying, that Rome conquers, or is conquered, and Madame Corrao has written upon it a strong story to show how life in Rome tests the man who goes there to live. To the man of high principle and fixed character Rome gives what can be had nowhere else; the unstable and the corruptible, Rome grinds to powder. The parable is true of every great city, and in a measure of all college life, certainly of the great university. Principles of conduct ought to be settled, habits formed, conventionalities accepted, before one comes. Then the course is straight, and opportunity unbounded. But the fellow who comes waiting to find out what



others do and how others think, drops into the ruck or is cast out in the refuse.

Times change and manners change with them: an Achilles behaving to-day as that hero did at the siege of Troy would be a simple ruffian. But, when all is said, there is no better equipment for the young man starting out in life than a good stock of conventional virtues well wrought into both his convictions and his habits. The prevalent cry for rehabilitating the Ten Commandments may well extend to include the teaching and the ways of the old-fashioned home.

“Not to be conquered by these headlong days,  
 But to stand free; to keep the mind at brood  
 On life's deep meaning, nature's attitude  
 Of loveliness, and time's mysterious ways;  
 At every thought and deed to clear the haze  
 Out of our eyes, considering only this,  
 What man, what life, what love, what beauty is,”—

to be equipped for all this, it still remains true that, on the whole, there is nothing better for most boys than to hold fast to the teaching of their mother.