



Charlotte Mason's House of Education,
Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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"MASTERLY INACTIVITY."

BY THE EDITOR.

(Continued from page 735.)

WE have considered in a former paper the wisdom and duty of "a wise passiveness," "a masterly activity" in the bringing up of children. It remains to glance in detail at the various points in a child's life where this principle should be brought into action. And, first, as regards children's *play*. There is a little danger in these days of much educational effort that children's play should be crowded out, or, what is from our present point of view the same thing, should be prescribed for and arranged until there is no more freedom of choice about play than about work. We do not say a word against the educational value of games. We know that many things are learned in the playing-fields; that the qualities which we associate with the name of Englishman are largely the product of the laws of the games; and there is a pretty steady effort being made to bring these same forces to bear upon girls that they, too, may grow up with the law-abiding principle, the moral stamina and the resourcefulness, which are more or less the outcome of the education carried on in the playing-fields. But organised games are not play in the sense we have in view. Boys and girls must have time to invent episodes, carry on adventures, live heroic lives, lay sieges and carry forts, even if the fortress is an arm-chair, and in these affairs the elders must neither meddle nor make. They must be content to know that they do not understand, and, what is more, that they carry with them a chill breath of reality which sweeps away illusions. Think what it must mean to a general in command of his forces to be told by some intruder into the play-world to tie his shoe-strings! There is an idea afloat that children require to be taught to play—to play at being little fishes and lambs and butterflies. No doubt they enjoy these games which are made for them, but there is a serious danger. In

this matter the child who goes too much on crutches never learns to walk; he who is most played with by his elders has little power of inventing plays for himself, and so he misses that education which comes to him when allowed to go his own way and act—

"As if his whole vocation
Were endless imitation."

In their *work*, too, we are too apt to interfere with children. We all know the delight with which any scope for personal initiative is hailed, the pleasure children take in doing anything which they may do their own way; anything in fact which allows room for skill of hand, play of fancy, or development of thought. With our present theories of education it seems that we cannot give much scope for personal initiative. There is so much task-work to be done, so many things that must be, not learned, but learned *about*, that it is only now and then a child gets the chance to produce himself in his work. But let us use such opportunities as come in our way. A very interesting and instructive educational experiment on these lines has just been tried at the School Field, Hackney, where Mr. Sargant got together some eighty boys and girls under the conditions of an ordinary elementary school, except that the school was supported, not by the Education Department nor by the rates, but by the founder. The results seem to have been purely delightful; the children developed an amazing capacity for drawing, perhaps because so soon as they were familiar with the outlines of the flower and foliage of a given plant, for example, they were encouraged to form designs with these elements. The really beautiful floral designs produced by these girls and boys, after quite a short art training, would surprise parents whose children have been taught drawing for years with no evident result. These School Field children developed themselves a great deal on their school magazine also, for which they wrote tales and poems, and essays, not prescribed work, but self-chosen. The children's thoughts were stimulated, and they felt they had it in them to say much about a doll's ball, Peter, the school cat, or whatever other subjects struck their fancy. "They felt their feet," as the nurses say of children when they begin to walk; and our non-success in education is a good deal due to the fact that we

carry children through their school work and do not let them feel their feet. In another way, more within our present control, we do not let children alone enough in their work. We prod them continually and do not let them stand or fall by their own efforts. One of the features, and one of the disastrous features of modern society, is that, in our laziness, we depend upon prodders and encourage a vast system of prodding. We are prodded to our social duties, to our charitable duties, and to our religious duties. If we pay a subscription to a charity, we expect the secretary to prod us when it becomes due. If we attend a meeting, do we often do so of our own spontaneous will, or because somebody asks us to go and reminds us half-a-dozen times of the day and the hour? Perhaps it is a result of the hurry of the age that there is a curious division of labour, and society falls into those who prod and those who are prodded. Not that anybody prods in all directions, nor that anybody else offers himself entirely as a pin-cushion. It is more true, perhaps, to say that we all prod, and that we all are prodded. Now an occasional prick is stimulating and wholesome, but the *vis inertiae* of human nature is such that we would rather lean up against a wall of spikes than not lean at all. What we must guard against in the training of children is the danger of their getting into the habit of being prodded to every duty and every effort. Our whole system of school policy is largely a system of prods. Marks, prizes, exhibitions, are all prods. We do not say that they are all faulty or unnecessary. We do say that a system of prods is apt to obscure the meaning of *must* and *ought* for the boy or girl who gets into the habit of mental and moral lolling up against his prods.

We believe that it would be better for boys and girls to suffer the consequences of not doing their work, now and then, than to do it because they are so urged and prodded on all hands that they have no volition in the matter. The more we are prodded the lazier we get, and the less capable of the effort of will which should carry us to, and nearly carry us through, our tasks. Boys and girls are, on the whole, good, and desirous to do their duty. If we expect the tale of bricks to be delivered at the due moment without urging or entreating, rewarding or punishing, in nine cases out of ten, we shall get what we look for. Where many of us err is in leaning too

much to our own understanding and our own efforts, and not trusting sufficiently to the dutiful impulse which will carry children through the work they are expected to do.

With regard to the choice of friends and companions, again, we should train children so that we should be able to honour them with a generous confidence, and if we give them this confidence we shall find that they justify it. If Fred has made a companion of Harry Jones, and Harry is not a nice boy, Fred will find the fact out as soon as his mother if he is let alone, and will probably come for advice and help as to the best way of getting out of an intimacy which does not really please him. But if Harry is boycotted by the home authorities and made the object of various prohibitions and exclusions, why Fred, if he is a generous boy, will feel in honour bound to take his comrade's part, and an intimacy which might have been easily dropped becomes cemented. Ethel will not see the reason why she, as the daughter of a professional man, may not make a friend of Maud, who sits beside her at school and is the daughter of a tradesman. But these minor matters must be left to circumstances, and the mother who brings forward questions of class, appearance, etc., as affecting her children's choice of friends, does her best to create that obtuseness as to vital points of character which is the cause of most shipwrecked lives. In this matter, as in all others, the parent's inactivity must be masterly, that is, the young people should read approval or disapproval very easily, and should be able to trace one or the other to general principles of character and conduct, though nothing be said or done or even looked in disparagement of the ally of the hour.

In the spending of pocket-money is another opportunity for initiative on the children's part and for self-restraint on that of the parents. No doubt the father who doles out the weekly pocket-money and has never given his children any large thoughts about money—as to how the smallest income is divisible into the share that we give, and the share that we keep, and the share that we save for some object worth possessing, to be had, perhaps, after weeks or months of saving; as to the futility of buying that we may eat, an indulgence that we should rarely allow ourselves at all, and never except for the pleasure of sharing with others; as to

how it is worth while to think twice before making a purchase with the lesson before us of *Rosamund and the Purple Jar!*—such a father cannot expect his children to think of money in any light but as a means to self-indulgence. But talks like these should have no obvious and immediate bearing on the weekly pocket-money; that should be spent as the children like, they having been instructed as to how they should like to spend it. By degrees pocket-money should include the cost of gloves, handkerchiefs, etc., until finally the girl, who is well on in her teens, should be fit to be trusted with her own allowance for dress and personal expenses. The parents who do not trust their young people in this matter, after having trained them, are hardly qualifying them to take their place in a world in which the wise, just, and generous spending of money is a great test of character.

We have only room to mention one more point in which all of us, who have the care of young people, would do well to practise a wise "letting alone." There are burning questions in the air, seething opinions in men's minds: in religion, in politics, in literature, in art, as regards every kind of social effort, we are all disposed to hold strenuous opinions. The person who has not kept himself in touch with the movement of the thought of the world in all these matters has little cause to pride himself. It is our duty to form opinions carefully, and to hold them tenaciously in so far as the original grounds of our opinions remain unshaken. But what we have no right to do, is to pass these opinions on to our children. We all know that nothing is easier than to make vehement partisans of young people, in any cause heartily adopted by their elders. But a reaction comes, and the swinging of the pendulum is apt to carry them to a point of thought painfully remote from our own. The mother of the Newmans was a devoted Evangelical, and in their early years passed her opinions over to her sons, ready-made; believing, perhaps, that the line of thought they received from her, was what they had come to by their own thinking. But when they are released from the domination of their mother's opinions, one seeks anchorage in the Church of Rome, and another will have no restriction as to his freedom of thought and will, and chooses to shape for himself his own creed or negation of a creed. Perhaps this pious mother would have

been saved some anguish if she had given her children the living principles of the Christian faith, which are not matters of opinion, and allowed them to accept her particular practice in their youth without requiring them to take their stand on Evangelical opinions as offering practically the one way of salvation.

In politics, again, let children be fired with patriotism and instructed in the duties of citizenship, but, if they can be kept out of the party strife of an election, well for them. Children are far more likely to embrace the opinions of their parents, when they are ripe to form opinions, if these have not been forced upon them in early youth when their lack of knowledge and experience makes it impossible for them to form opinions at first hand. Only by "masterly inactivity," "wise passiveness," able "letting alone," can a child be trained—

"To reverence his conscience as his King."

We all admire spontaneity, but this grace, even in children, is not an indigenous wild-flower. In so far as it is a grace, it is the result of training,—of pleasant talks upon the general principles of conduct, and wise "letting alone" as to the practice of these principles. To parents, who have in their hands the making of family customs, it belongs especially to beware—

"Lest one good custom should corrupt the world."