

THE FETISH OF OBEDIENCE

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Drawings by Harriet Repplier

SOME one, away back in the dim past, put a halo round the word "obedience" and canonized it, and we have been bowing in reverence to it ever since. But all obedience is not good nor wise. There are two brands of obedience: one is self-surrender to the guidance of a principle; the other, self-surrender to the domination of a person. The first is good; the second may be dangerous. The first inspires from within; the second controls from without. The first makes individuals self-governing through respect for the law; the second, governed by force of the lawmaker.

Parents often make the mistake of setting up obedience of the second class as a fetish in the home. They treat it as worshipping savages ascribe marvellous powers to pieces of wood and stone. They govern by force of authority. They seem to believe that in making the children "mind," they are training them; that in constantly forcing them to walk a chalk-line of action, they are guaranteeing their future welfare; that in doing all the child's thinking for it, they are teaching it to think for itself.

This method leads inevitably to overgovernment. Overgovernment in a nation transforms its people into benumbed, submissive slaves or hypocritical rebels living in hope of escape. It has much the same result in family life. In neither cases does it instil or inspire principles; it merely controls acts.

In homes where obedience is made a fetish, the moral atmosphere is that of a hothouse, heavy with prohibitions and commands. You feel the forcing process, not the gentle, sympathetic training of the children to grow their natural best. There are "Keep Off the Grass!" signs and similar prohibitions all over the house. The children are brought up in a straitjacket of "Don'ts!" When little Susan was asked her name at the kindergarten, she said, "Susan Don't"—"Are you sure that is your name?" queried the teacher. "Oh, yes, that's what mama always calls me at home." It reveals the same spirit as the young mother's command to her child's nurse: "Go to the nursery and see what Mary is doing, and make her stop it."

"A Soldier's Discipline."

THERE is a "moral anecdote," one of those sugar-coated sophistries to deaden thinking, told of Sir Henry Havelock, the hero of Lucknow. A visitor called at his house in London one bitter, cold evening, and in the course of a cozy chat Mrs. Havelock turned suddenly to her husband and said, "My dear, where is Henry?" referring to her son, whom she had not seen all afternoon. The Colonel started to his feet with the remark, "Well, poor fellow! he's standing on London Bridge in this terrible cold. I told him to wait for me there at twelve o'clock. It is now seven, and I forgot all about the appointment." Then as he started out to release the boy, he excused himself to his visitor, saying, "You see, that is the discipline of a soldier's family." Here surely was the fetish of obedience, the vanity of power and authority, transforming the child into a mere automaton, with reason, sense, judgment, and

initiative cruelly chloroformed by this false sense of obedience. Was not Henry a good little boy? No, he was not a good little boy. He was a silly little prize prig, fit only to play marbles with Casabianca, who barbecued himself because he could not leave the deck without his dead father's permission.

The ultimate object of training a child should be to make it individual, self-controlled, self-reliant, self-directing, guided to follow his reason, making his own high standard his inspiration, living a life based on honor, truth, justice. To reap proper harvests, we must plant proper seed. The child is not likely to become self-directing if he is taught to be dependent ever on the direction of some one else,—if he is taught only self-suppression, surrendering submissively to another's will, responding not to his own reason, the dictates of his own judgment,—moved ever from without instead of being inspired to move from within. We can make a watch keep fairly good time by moving the hands back and forward as it runs too fast or too slow; but it is unsatisfactory, because the timekeeping element is outside the works,—they are not put into the condition where they move accurately automatically by their own initiative, the inspiration from within.

Don't Make It the Issue

PARENTS may feel that in limiting or diminishing the reliance on obedience, the keystone of the arch of home discipline will be removed and the structure must fall. This is not true. The plea here is that obedience should not be constantly talked of, constantly obtruded as if it was in itself final. It should not be the issue. It should not be the basis of the relation of parent to child. This does not imply that the child should be left to its own resources, permitted to grow wild; to be subject to no guidance, no control; to be indulged and pampered in silly weakness and selfishness. The child should merely be trained on higher, better lines, substituting for the word of command and the rod of authority, firm, wise, kindly, guiding influence and inspiration.

Forcing the selfish child to divide its cake with its brother may result in obedience. The act may be controlled; but the character is not improved. The insistence on obedience does not go deep enough; it is merely cutting off the tops of the weeds, leaving the vitality in their roots to persist and increase. Until the child is taught to see the wrong of selfishness, the pettiness, meanness, and injustice of it, until it is brought by a change of impulse from within to share voluntarily, there has been no real improvement.

"How then," asks the bewildered parent, "can the child be trained aright?" By establishing a relation of friendship and loving companionship with the child; by seeking to see its acts from the child's viewpoint; by appealing to its reason; by substituting suggestion for command; by example and proper environment rather than by nagging precept; by appeal to its strength, its higher motives; by strengthening its inner convictions, and teaching it to learn by experience.

Our management of children is often a strange medley, a paradoxical underestimate. We expect from them actions far beyond their years, while at the same time we underrate their minds and their powers and misunderstand their motives. Children often cry out in protest, "I don't think it's fair!" showing an instinctive sense of justice that may be used as a lever to help them to higher living. They constantly ask, "Why?" revealing reason struggling toward development, reason asserting itself as a guiding principle. They are quick to note departures from truth in those around them; they instinctively puncture the tire of some one's insincerity or inconsistency,—showing a native honesty and honor. They respect firmness, but rebel against force. In this justice, reason, truth, and respect for law is the foundation upon which parents may build characters.

Crying for Things

THE child can be taught from its early life that crying will not win for it what it is not right for it to have. But the child may cry persistently; and in order to secure quiet, merely for the parents' comfort and convenience, the prohibited possession is surrendered to it. If the infant was clever enough to express its unformulated thoughts, it might write in its diary that night:

"Had a great victory to-day. Wanted to play ball with father's watch. Mother put it on the

mantel. I began to yell. Conference between father and mother. He seemed rather mad, muttered something about 'stopping that infernal noise!' I yelled more vigorously. Another conference. Arbitration committee finally awarded me the watch, in desperation. Promptly broke crystal, stopped the works, and laid off the hands. Learned this valuable lesson: If at first you don't get what you want, yell, yell again."

If the crying had not succeeded, the child would soon learn that it was wasting energy and making a useless exhibition of emotion. It would respect firmness, score one lesson by experience, and receive a feeble impetus toward self-government. When it grows older, the "why" of situations similar to the watch episode can be explained to it.

Obedience through fear, threats, policy, wheedling, promise of reward, or a dozen different inspiring motives may confuse the child, deaden his sensibility to the great fact of law. The child's "why" is the expression of a natural automatic process of testing a fact through its individuality, to classify the fact properly, and to see it in its relation to life, and to reason from the single instance.

A Lesson from Experience

AT the breakfast table a child may reach out to touch the shining coffee urn. The parent, who feels that mere obedience is the ultimate ideal in the home, may say, "Don't touch that! Now I tell you, don't touch it! If you do, I'll punish you." The child, mastered by fear, may refrain.

The wiser parent may say, "You should not touch the hot coffee urn. It will burn your little fingers if you do. Hot things always hurt little children if they handle them."

If the child seeks to persist, the mother, firmly holding the urn so that it cannot spill and scald the investigator, may not interfere when the daring rebel fingers still reach out and prove for themselves that it is really hot. The burn, the mother knows, will be but slight, a trifling pain that can instantly be relieved; but the lesson may be great. The child will have made a personal deduction; he will have experimented in breaking law, and been punished for it; he has converted experiment into experience. He has now greater respect for the parent whose wisdom he sees and whose warning he has disregarded; her guiding power and influence are increased. He has not been punished for disobedience, but for breaking a law of nature, which he knew in advance yet dared to disobey.

There is danger in seeking to goad the child into saintship by constantly talking of its faults, by an irritating multiplicity of rebukes, commands, threats, censures, complaints, and protests. They weaken the child and lessen the parent's power. In an atmosphere of scolding the child feels a hopelessness of doing anything right, and he ceases to care or to try. If the parent allows certain trifles to pass seemingly without notice until the proper time, place, and mood,—the psychological moment when there are a number of similar instances needing

