THE LASH OF THE TASKMASTER

We cannot fail to recognize a challenge in the fact that a certain ex-trainer of pugilists and champion of the wrestling ring has grown rich at the rate of a hundred thousand dollars a year by literally bullying men’s bodies back into health. All forms of bullying, be it remembered, affect the will as well as the body. The challenge then takes the form of an interrogation mark. Why does one man pay another one hundred dollars a week for allowing him to submit to a system of arbitrary routine and of personal tyranny which would arouse protest in the inmates of a State’s prison? And the question becomes the more baffling when we note that these men who pay for the privilege of yielding absolute obedience to a man whose superiority is neither intellectual nor spiritual but merely a matter of physique and of will power, come not only from the ranks of our business men, our lawyers, our doctors and our preachers, but from among the men who are our leaders in statesmanship and who represent us in our dealings with other nations.

But this obedience is voluntary, you may say, and is justified by the results. Certainly no one can doubt that discipline, in a great majority of cases, offers a sovereign remedy for flabby bodies and shattered nervous systems. But there is nothing occult or secret about the methods of this man and his institution, and it is that fact which affords us our text. Among the class of people from whom his patients are recruited there can be few indeed who do not already know, at least theoretically, the value of simple fare, ample outdoor exercise, regular hours for eating, sleeping and working, and abstinence from all narcotics and artificial stimulants, as aids to physical rehabilitation. And all these factors in the recovery of health are within their reach at any time, freely theirs for the taking. What they buy of this man, then, is something more than a course of treatment. It is the temporary use of his will. But for the driving force of this one man’s will their pampered and undisciplined bodies would refuse to reach out and grasp the health which is really always accessible. Not having the will-power to drive themselves, they must pay a taskmaster to apply the lash.

What this actually means, as exemplified in a well known and successful institution in which men pay to be domineered over, can be very eloquently indicated by the citation of a few unadorned facts. The patient—who pays for a week’s treatment in advance, and sacrifices his money if, as often happens, he leaves prematurely—is expected to obey absolutely the most trivial as well as the important commands of the proprietor. Thus not only must he eat, sleep, bathe, exercise and dress at the word of command as punctiliously as a soldier marching in manoeuvres, but he must leave his coffee spoon in or out of his cup according to orders, and he is checked peremptorily and without ceremony if he ventures to get into his bath right-foot-first when he has been told to get in left-foot-first. He may be a Supreme Court
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Judge or a United States Senator, but he stands up and sits down at the word of an ex-trainer for the prize-ring as weekly as any schoolboy. Nor are the words of command here in vogue spoken gently or softened by any of the formulas of courtesy. Instead it is “Didn’t you hear what I said? I wonder how long it will be before I smash one of you muths!”

Is this whole amazing phenomenon, we may ask in passing, merely another instance of our blind acceptance of the “institution”? To answer this question fairly it would be necessary to examine all the facts connected with its growth and development, and these facts we have not at hand. But it would seem that something of this must have entered into the situation before a system of discipline which reduces men to tears in the privacy of their cubicles could become almost a fashion.

Now it is doubtless true that the orders given are, in the main, wise orders, even if roughly uttered. And it is also doubtless true that by obedience to these orders the patients regain bodily vigor and re-establish their general physical and mental efficiency. But is it conceivable that their self-respect, that essential element of personal integrity, has not suffered in the process? They will perhaps salve their wounded dignity by philosophizing on the value and beauty of obedience. As one of them said, “It is a good thing for a man to learn to obey.” Yet the worth of obedience depends entirely upon where it is rendered. There is virtue in obeying just laws, or the dictates of our conscience or our reason. But on the other hand there is often just as much virtue in disobedience and revolt. In this case, obedience should have begun earlier, and it should have been obedience, under no other coercion than that of the individual’s own will, to those simple laws of physical health which are today a part of the common knowledge of the race. Is such obedience too much to expect of the average well-educated man or woman in this day of wide enlightenment? If it is, then we must accept with what grace we can the humiliating spectacle of men from our cultured professional classes and even molders of our national policy flocking weakly around a man of will and paying him to force them to live, for a time at least, sanely and temperately.

It is true, of course, that the inmates of sanitariums as a whole present many a depressing spectacle of enfeebled will power, many a futile and fluttering pursuit of that health which would probably have been nearer their grasp had they not broken in panic from their places, in the great ranks of the world’s workers. It is always pathetic and saddening to see people dropping out of the main current of life to wander in search of that which should be as much their birthright as the air they breathe. But many of these deserters from the field are really old and broken, and many have been hopelessly handicapped from birth. On the other hand the health resort which forms our text is recruited only from those who are still capable of bearing a part in the battle —men whose vitality is sufficient to flame up instead of flickering out under the heroic treatment accorded them. Is it anything less than an indictment of our civilization that such men should have need of such a refuge?

“It is a sick business,” says the proprietor, “trying to make anything decent out of these fellows.” There speaks the understandable scorn of a man who, through his will, is the master of his own body, for those who have let the reins slip from their fingers to be caught up by one form of destructive excess or another—excesses of appetite or of indolence, of barren dissipation or of productive but ill-regulated labor. Is not the scorn deserved? And when we look at the class of men who incur it—men who have had all the advantages of our elaborate educational system, and who may therefore be regarded as to some extent typical of its results—we wonder if it is not time for some shifting of emphasis in our national ideals. There are some salutory truths that Sparta taught.
and that we have forgotten. It would be nonsense to take the pessimistic view that we are an effete people, no longer able to subject our own bodies to the wholesome, hardy discipline of sane living—which is the only freedom. But it is not extravagant to suggest that by our educational methods we have laid less stress than we might on the development of the individual will. We have not given to self-control and self-mastery as high a place as they deserve among our national ideals. If we had, would we find so many of our successful men, men of position and achievement, paying a fellow man large sums to browbeat him, through lack of ability to enforce their own authority over their own bodies? We see on every side of us such men, who have cultivated their brains, at least along the particular line of their ambitions, but have indulged and pampered or else neglected and abused their bodies, and have allowed their wills to atrophy, except in so far as these served to hold them true to their little inadequate vision of success. Is not such self-defrauding blindness, or ignorance, or indifference, if we stop to contemplate it, one of the most amazing spectacles afforded by our marvelous, blundering, half-realized civilization? Yet even modern philosophy, which aims to look at all the facts in the face and can scarcely be suspected of a too easy optimism, admits that it is perfectly possible to adjust all the demands of life to one ideal,—which for lack of a better word we may call happiness—and to adjust that ideal to its natural conditions. In other words, it is possible to live that sane and poised life which is the life of reason, and which has happiness and well-being for its sanction. As steps toward this goal it is perfectly feasible to treat our bodies with respect, and to keep our wills on the drivers’ seat in fair weather as well as foul. Would it not be well to impress these possibilities upon our citizens as children, and thereby save them from the necessity of sacrificing their self-respect to regain a partial dominion over their bodies in middle age?

R. Robert Henri preceded the opening of his school on the Tuesday after Labor Day by an exhibit of foreign prints reproducing many of the famous paintings and drawings of the old masters, chiefly those of Franz Hals, Rembrandt and the Spanish painters, Goya, Greco and Velasquez. The prints are the property of Mr. Henri, collected during his various trips abroad for reference and study. They have been carefully selected and many of them are rare. Mr. Henri’s object in exhibiting them was to give his pupils a comprehensive review of the work of each of these artists, and thus to show the pictures not as individual specimens of the men’s methods, but as various ways in which the artists found expression. We have the pleasure of a one-man exhibit frequently among modern artists, but where, as in the case of the old masters, every famous gallery of Europe, England and America cherishes one or two particular jewels of their work, it rarely happens that we can see more than a few of their pictures together.

The large collection of Goya was a particularly valuable experience. It is interesting to recall how little we knew of Spanish art twenty-five years ago. It is to Whistler, largely, that we owe our pleasure in the galleries of Spain, and the Hispanic Society of America has done much to foster our interest by its exhibits of the modern school.

During the Zuloaga exhibition last winter, it will be remembered that his work was compared to that of Goya, whose earnest student and admirer he was. This was again emphasized in the prints of the older artist. There was the same wide range of subjects, each painted with a deep understanding that related them to the greater world of human emotion. Goya lived in the last of the eighteenth century and the first of the nineteenth; he was a many-sided man, roisterer and gentleman, rebel and patriot, and his art evi-