

CHAPTER XIX

CHARACTER—ILLNESS—A LONG REST

BEFORE making my holiday journey through the North Frisian islands, I left with the printer the manuscript of my little book on *Character*. I had written it out many years before, and stored it away in my literary cupboard. It was, like my other books, the result of my evenings' leisure. I there endeavoured to illustrate the power and efficiency of individual character. My object was to impress the minds of the rising generation with examples of noble behaviour, taken from the lives of the best men and women who had ever lived.

I also left with the printer the sheets of another book—the account of my youngest son's *Voyage Round the World*, which I edited. He had been sent out to Australia a few years before, in search of health, which had been restored; and I thought that *The Boy's Voyage* might be useful as well as interesting to other young people. The sheets of both books were ready for correction on my return home.

Both books were very well received on their publication in the following November (1871). With respect to the last-mentioned volume, the *Saturday Review* observed: "We should be curious to learn how Mr Smiles has taught his son to write his own

language. He cannot, we are sure, have sent him to school, for that is the last place where a boy learns English. If, however, any school can claim the author of *A Boy's Voyage Round the World*, it has at least as good reason for pride as if it had gained the Balliol scholarship."

There was, doubtless, some mixture of joke in this praise. But the fact is, that the boy first learnt his English at a girls' school. He was then sent to St Paul's School, London; but he made so little progress there, that he was removed to La Châteline, near Geneva, and placed under the charge of Misses Thudicum and Lotheissen, where he learnt French and German, and acquired a considerable amount of scholastic knowledge. But he was never "taught" to write English. He must have acquired the practice by reading, writing, and possibly by his acquaintance with other languages besides his own.

Both these volumes were re-published in the United States, where they had as large a circulation as in Britain. Both were translated into French and German. *Character* was perhaps more appreciated on the Continent than at home. It was translated into the Italian by Rotondi, and had a great sale in Italy. M. de Gubernatis did me the honour to say that "thanks to Mr Smiles, our people now read something else than bad novels; and this seems to me an immense improvement." Shortly after the publication of the Italian translation, I was appointed an "Honorary President" of the Alessandro Manzoni Literary Institution in Monteleone, Calabria—a place that I have not yet seen. *Character* also gave its name to a new journal published at Mantua, entitled *Il Carattere*, of which the proprietors sent me the early numbers, requesting a communication,

to which I acceded; and a society for Mutual Help sprang out of the existence of this new publication.

Of course the Dutch had their translations; they were generally the first to introduce my works to foreign readers. M. Buys translated the title of *Character* into *Ken u Zelfen*, as he had translated *Self-Help* into *Help u Zelfen*. Professor Mourek translated it in Czech, for the use of the inhabitants of Bohemia. The Prague reviewer, in the *Komensky*, spoke of it as "a golden book—a sort of practical bible." M. Mirko Turic, of Zengg, was very enthusiastic. He said *Character* was still more valuable than *Self-Help*, and was a real treasure for anyone, but particularly for the young. "These great and beautiful truths," he said, "these sublime and noble thoughts, which I find on every page of your *Character*, have so transported me, that I cannot refrain from asking the privilege of translating your beautiful work into my mother tongue, the Croatian language." Of course, I at once gave my assent.

Translations were also made into the Magyar language at Pesh, for the Hungarians; into the Danish and the Russian; and into the Gujarati for the people of Bombay. My friend, Mr Henty, banker of Chichester, told me that he had seen a translation of my book in a shop window at Stockholm, and went in and purchased a copy. Translations may have been made in other languages, of which I knew nothing. I need not recite the encouragements I have received from young men at Moscow, Boston (U.S.), Belfast, India, and elsewhere—setting forth what good my books have done, and requesting me to continue my instruction.

One young lady, who has done excellent work as

a nurse, and as an organiser of nursing establishments, said, "Perhaps, without offence, I may say that *Character* has been of more good to me than any sermon I have heard for a long day." And a young man at Belfast, whom I do not know otherwise than by his letter, has said that "this little book has done me more good, morally and intellectually, than all the books I have read, and all the sermons I have heard, for many years." Indeed, I was pleased to learn that a rector at Malden had read a passage from the work to his congregation on the third Sunday in Lent, being appropriate to the subject of his sermon. "I go heart and soul with you," he wrote to me, "in what you say about a woman's influence over her children; for I daily feel that, under God, my wife has been the maker of all her children's character, and it is such a comfort to myself to see how they all look up to her."

I will only quote one letter from my excellent friend, Sir Arthur Helps, to whom I sent an early copy:—

"30th November 1871.

"MY DEAR SMILES,—

"Your book, Sir, upon *Character* is a pestilently dangerous work to send to an official man. What happens? He takes it up, just to look at it, and (confound the book!) he cannot help going on reading it, to the detriment of his official work. No works, except those which are very dull, ought to be sent to official people.

"But, seriously speaking, the book is a most interesting one; and I congratulate you upon having done your work so well.—Yours very sincerely,
"ARTHUR HELPS."

And now I have to relate how it was that my work was brought, for a time, suddenly to an end. I was habitually careless of my health. I did not

take my meals regularly. I had not much of an appetite, and often went without a dinner. I was satisfied with a lunch in the middle of the day; and then, when I should have gone home, and had a dinner and rest, I had a few cups of tea before sitting down to work for the evening, and I often continued until late at night.

The consequence of this style of living was, that my physical power was getting wasted faster than my enfeebled digestion could repair it. I wanted the refreshment of regular food, and the still greater refreshment of regular rest. The brain weakens under protracted labour, especially at night. After writing for some hours, my brain got excited, and refused to lay aside its capacity for thinking. I ceased to sleep, and in sleep only does the brain get perfect rest. I knew that something must be going wrong; for I was subject to palpitations, and had frequent flushings of the face, showing a determination of blood to the head.

I was again burning the candle at both ends, and trying to get more than sixteen ounces out of the pound. Why did not I stop? Poor, weak, unreflecting human nature. "We know the right, and yet the wrong pursue." I was old enough—for I was approaching sixty—and ought to have been wise enough, to know better; and yet I went on with my evening's literary labour. Montaigne says, in his *Essays*, that "pleasure, to deceive us, marches before and conceals her train. Books are pleasant, but if by being over-studious we impair our health, and spoil our good humour, two of the best pieces we have, let us give it over; for I, for my part, am one of those who think that no fruit derived from them can recompense so great a loss."

Nature, or rather the laws of health, came to my aid; though not without subjecting me to a great peril. One evening, after Mr Murray's annual sale, when the whole of the first edition of *Character* had been subscribed for, I proceeded to make the necessary corrections for another edition. Correcting printed sheets is always more fatiguing than writing them in manuscript. It requires closer attention to minute points, such as commas, semicolons, and full stops; while there is not the interest of writing out fresh thoughts. To alleviate the fatigue, I occasionally took a turn at writing out a brief account of my recent visit to the Frisian Islands. I intended this most probably for *Good Words*, but I never had the courage to read over the paper, after the summary manner in which it was interrupted.

I felt a curious humming in my head, and a tingling at the points of my fingers. I stopped work, walked about the room, felt better, and then sat down again. I was proceeding with the corrections, when again the curious sensations returned. I turned down the gas, resolved to cease working for the night. On trying to turn the handle of the door with my right hand, I found that it was powerless. I felt it with the left hand: it was like ice, and hung down like a lump of lead. I turned the handle with my left hand, and went downstairs. It was the same below: my right hand continued powerless.

I entered the room, where only my mother-in-law was present—for the rest of the family had gone to a Penny Reading at the schools connected with St Stephen's Church. I must have made some ejaculation, for the old lady looked round, and saw that something was the matter with me. She rang for the servants, and sent for the doctor. Everything

passed away from my recollection; and the next sensation I had was that of being carried from the chair which I had occupied, towards the sofa. In short, I had experienced a sharp attack of paralysis.

Now I had the rest which I needed. Indeed, I was perfectly helpless. I could scarcely move. I could not speak. My muscular power gradually returned, but it was days before I recovered my speech, and still longer before I could write my name. I found that I had lost the recollection of all proper names, and in a great measure lost the recollection of words. When I began to speak, I often used the wrong word. I had to recommence my knowledge of the English language. In fact, I suffered from aphasia.

My judgment, so far as it went, was not impaired, but my power of expressing it in words had left me. I could not read, but my wife read to me. I remember that some articles, then appearing in *Blackwood*, were read, respecting the education of French boys and girls. The boys were said to be prigs, and the girls to be almost perfect. My judgment said to me that this could not be possible—both being children of the same parents. But as the article set me a-thinking, and excited a pain in my head, I had to request a cessation of the reading for that day.

I meditated in my bed, and now determined to "pull up." If I recovered, I might yet spend a few more years on earth, though I feared that my working faculties were gone. But I knew that my only chance was long and perfect rest. I was urged by Mr Gilpin to continue in my employment, which secured a handsome income; but I knew that I could not be satisfied without doing some work for it, and that this might bring back a return of the

disease. This consideration determined me, and I sent in my resignation. I was now free, and an idle man!

What was I to do? I had been always accustomed to industrious habits, and could not be entirely idle. I took exercise, and began to use my limbs briskly. I read a little, gradually recovered my use of the language, and endeavoured to spend most of my time in the open air. When I was able to travel, I went over to Dublin, to see my youngest son, who was in business there. Then I went to see my eldest son, who was established in Belfast. From Ireland, I went to Dunoon on the Clyde, where I remained a few months. I gradually recovered my strength; gained several stone in weight; and attended to my digestion. I left my brain to lie fallow.

In 1873, I took a student's ticket at the South Kensington Museum, and attended at Bethnal Green for the purpose of copying in water-colours many of Sir Richard Wallace's paintings in oil. I refurbished up an old art, and derived a great deal of pleasure as well as much rest, from copying the works of Guardi, Bonnington, Descamps, Rousseau, and others. These bits of my leisure handiwork now ornament the walls of my sons and daughters. They are not of much importance, but the execution of them was a great relief to me. They saved me from thinking or worrying; and in that way helped the restoration of my health.

I went on cultivating idleness, and spent a considerable portion of the autumn of this year on the wild western coast of South Donegal, in Ireland. There I saw magnificent scenery, and imbibed abundant ozone. Every day saw me stronger and better

able for work. But I had not yet made up my mind again to follow any settled occupation. Indeed, Sir Edward Watkin made me a handsome proposal; but I did not see my way to accept it; and, on the whole, I think I was wise eventually to refuse it.

At the end of 1874 (10th November), I experienced a severe sorrow in the death of my dear daughter Edith. She was a good, affectionate daughter, and a favourite with everybody.