CHARACTER AND SUCCESS

Theodore Roosevelt

A YEAR or two ago I was speaking to a famous Yale professor, one of the most noted scholars in the country, and one who is even more than a scholar, because he is in every sense of the word a man. We had been discussing the Yale–Harvard foot-ball teams, and he remarked of a certain player: "I told them not to take him, for he was slack in his studies, and my experience is that, as a rule; the man who is slack in his studies will be slack in his foot-ball work; it is character that counts in both."

Bodily vigor is good, and vigor of intellect is even better, but far above both is character. It is true, of course, that a genius may, on certain lines, do more than a brave and manly fellow who is not a genius; and so, in sports, vast physical strength may overcome weakness, even though the puny body may have in it the heart of a lion. But, in the long run, in the great battle of life, no brilliancy of intellect, no perfection of bodily development, will count when weighed in the balance against that assemblage of virtues, active and passive, of moral qualities, which we group together under the name of character; and if between any two contestants, even in college sport or in college work, the difference in character on the right side is as great as the difference of intellect or strength the, other way, it is the character side that will win.

Of course this does not mean that either intellect or bodily vigor can safely be neglected. On the contrary, it means that both should be developed, and that not the least of the benefits of developing both comes from the indirect effect which this development itself has upon the character. In very rude and ignorant communities all schooling is more or less looked down upon; but there are now very few places indeed in the United States where elementary schooling is not considered a necessity. There are any number of men, however, priding themselves upon being "hard-headed" and "practical," who sneer at book-learning and at every form of higher education, under the impression that the additional mental culture is at best useless, and is ordinarily harmful in practical life. Not long ago two of the wealthiest men in the United States publicly committed themselves to the proposition that to go to college was a positive disadvantage for a young man who strove for success. Now, of course, the very most successful men we have ever had, men like Lincoln, had no chance to go to college, but did have such indomitable tenacity and such keen appreciation of the value of wisdom that they set to work and learned for themselves far more than they could have been taught in any academy. On the other hand, boys of weak fiber, who go to high school or college instead of going to work after getting through the primary schools, may be seriously damaged instead of benefited. But, as a rule, if the boy has in him the right stuff, it is a great advantage to him should his circumstances be so fortunate as to enable him to get the years of additional mental training. The trouble with the two rich men whose views are above quoted was that, owing largely perhaps to their own defects in early training, they did not know what success really was. Their speeches merely betrayed their own limitations, and did not furnish any argument against education. Success must always include, as its first element, earning

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a competence for the support of the man himself, and for the bringing up of those dependent upon him. In the vast majority of cases it ought to include financially rather more than this. But the acquisition of wealth is not in the least the only test of success. After a certain amount of wealth has been accumulated, the accumulation of more is of very little consequence indeed from the standpoint of success, as success should be understood both by the community and the individual. Wealthy men who use their wealth aright are a great power for good in the community, and help to upbuild that material national prosperity which must underlie national greatness; but if this were the only kind of success, the nation would be indeed poorly off. Successful statesmen, soldiers, sailors, explorers, historians, poets, and scientific men are also essential to national greatness, and, in fact, very much more essential than any mere successful business man can possibly be. The average man, into whom the average boy develops, is, of course, not going to be a marvel in any line, but, if he only chooses to try, he can be very good in any line, and the chances of his doing good work are immensely increased if he has trained his mind. Of course, if as a result of his high-school, academy, or college experience, he gets to thinking that the only kind of learning is that to be found in books, he will do very little; but if he keeps his mental balance,—that is, if he shows character,—he will understand both what learning can do and what it cannot, and he will be all the better the more he can get.

A good deal the same thing is true of bodily development. Exactly as one kind of man sneers at college work because he does not think it bears any immediate fruit in money-getting, so another type of man sneers at college sports because he does not see their immediate effect for good in practical life. Of course, if they are carried to an excessive degree, they are altogether bad. It is a good thing for a boy to have captained his school or college eleven, but it is a very bad thing if, twenty years afterward, all that can be said of him is that he has continued to take an interest in foot-ball, base-ball, or boxing, and has with him the memory that he was once captain. A very acute observer has pointed out that, not impossibly, excessive devotion to sports and games has proved a serious detriment in the British army, by leading the officers and even the men to neglect the hard, practical work of their profession for the sake of racing, foot-ball, base-ball, polo, and tennis—until they received a very rude awakening at the hands of the Boers. Of course this means merely that any healthy pursuit can be abused. The student in a college who “crams” in order to stand at the head of his class, and neglects his health and stunts his development by working for high marks, may do himself much damage; but all that he proves is that the abuse of study is wrong. The fact remains that the study itself is essential. So it is with vigorous pastimes. If rowing or football or baseball is treated as the end of life by any considerable section of a community, then that community shows itself to be in an unhealthy condition. If treated as it should be,—that is, as good, healthy play,—it is of great benefit, not only to the body, but in its effect upon character. To study hard implies character in the student, and to work hard at a sport which entails severe physical exertion and steady training also implies character.

All kinds of qualities go to make up character, for, emphatically, the term should include the positive no less than the negative virtues. If we say of a boy or a man, “He is of good character,” we mean that he does not do a great many things that are wrong, and we also mean that he does do a great many things which imply much effort of will and readiness to face what is disagreeable. He must not steal, he must not be intemperate, he must not be vicious in any way; he must not be mean or brutal; he must not bully the weak. In fact, he must refrain from whatever is evil. But besides refraining

from evil, he must do good. He must be brave and energetic; he must be resolute and persevering. The Bible always inculcates the need of the positive no less than the negative virtues, although certain people who profess to teach Christianity are apt to dwell wholly on the negative. We are bidden not merely to be harmless as doves, but also as wise as serpents. It is very much easier to carry out the former part of the order than the latter; while, on the other hand, it is of much more importance for the good of mankind that our goodness should be accompanied by wisdom than that we should merely be harmless. If with the serpent wisdom we unite the serpent guile, terrible will be the damage we do; and if, with the best of intentions, we can only manage to deserve the epithet of "harmless," it is hardly worth while to have lived in the world at all.

Perhaps there is no more important component of character than steadfast resolution. The boy who is going to make a great man, or is going to count in any way in after life, must make up his mind not merely to overcome a thousand obstacles, but to win in spite of a thousand repulses or defeats. He may be able to wrest success along the lines on which he originally started. He may have to try something entirely new. On the one hand, he must not be volatile and irresolute, and, on the other hand, he must not fear to try a new line because he has failed in another. Grant did well as a boy and well as a young man; then came a period of trouble and failure, and then the Civil War and his opportunity; and he grasped it, and rose until his name is among the greatest in our history. Young Lincoln, struggling against incalculable odds, worked his way up, trying one thing and another until he, too, struck out boldly into the turbulent torrent of our national life, at a time when only the boldest and wisest could so carry themselves as to win success and honor; and from the struggle he won both death and honor, and stands forevermore among the greatest of mankind.

Character is shown in peace no less than in war. As the greatest fertility of invention, the greatest perfection of armament, will not make soldiers out of cowards, so no mental training and no bodily vigor will make a nation great if it lacks the fundamental principles of honesty and moral cleanliness. After the death of Alexander the Great nearly all of the then civilized world was divided among the Greek monarchies ruled by his companions and their successors. This Greek world was very brilliant and very wealthy. It contained haughty military empires, and huge trading cities, under republican government, which attained the highest pitch of commercial and industrial prosperity. Art flourished to an extraordinary degree; science advanced as never before. There were academies for men of letters; there were many orators, many philosophers. Merchants and business men throve apace, and for a long period the Greek soldiers kept the superiority and renown they had won under the mighty conqueror of the East. But the heart of the people was incurably false, incurably treacherous and debased. Almost every statesman had his price, almost every soldier was a mercenary who, for a sufficient inducement, would betray any cause. Moral corruption ate into the whole social and domestic fabric, until, a little more than a century after the death of Alexander, the empire which he had left had become a mere glittering shell, which went down like a house of cards on impact with the Romans; for the Romans, with all their faults, were then a thoroughly manly race—a race of strong, virile character.

Alike for the nation and the individual, the one indispensable requisite is character—character that does and dares as well as endures, character that is active in the performance of virtue no less than firm in the refusal to do aught that is vicious or degraded.