

“PLUTARCH” AS A SCHOOL BOOK.

BY MISS E. C. ALLEN.

HISTORY is the record of the works of men. “Show me your works,” says St. James, “and I will show you your faith.” So in the language of his time does the great writer whose work I want you to consider with me to-day. He shows us the deeds of the heroes of his own time, and from them he draws, not exactly their faith, but their character. He does more. He shows first how their environment and education crystallized their tendencies, and then how their character was expressed in their lives. Sparing no blame where he considers self-indulgence or ignorance to over-balance integrity, and lavish in praise of the “single eye” when it triumphs in the maze of ancient political warfare.

We all know something of Plutarch's *Lives*. We know that Shakespeare is said to have taken his Roman plays from them. We know that the Greek is not pure, and the style verbose. But we also know that in everyone of these short “Lives” we get a Man—not a series of historical events. An intimate gossipy biography written by one who was on the spot, who judged actions by a high philosophical standard, and who was sufficiently a psychologist to know that the little intimate details of a man's life often are more truly an indication of his character than the great events in which he moved among many. To take an instance:—When Solon was at the Court of Croesus, he refused to flatter the monarch by admiring his wealth, or calling him the happiest of men. Æsop, a philosopher of very different stamp and high in Court favour therefore, willing to help him to gain the royal ear, gave this advice:—“A man should resolve either not to converse with kings at all or to converse with them agreeably.” To which Solon replied, “Nay, he should either not converse with them at all, or converse with them usefully.”

No comment is made on the wisdom of either axiom. We are left to make our own.

Is not that kind of thing exactly what children want ? They are great moralists, and quite ready to do their own sermonizing. The contrast is so definite and the answer so neat.

To quote another instance. "Once the Athenians wished Demosthenes to accuse a man whom they wished to see condemned. He refusing to do it, the people were offended and did mutiny against him. Thereupon he, rising up, said openly unto them : " My Lords Athenians, I will always counsel you to that which I think best for the benefit of the Commonwealth, although it be against your minds ; but falsely to accuse one to satisfy your minds, though you command me, I will not do it." For this and other things showed he was no people-pleaser."

There is in this concisely told incident a power of standing alone, an integrity that goes straight to the heart of little boys, with their large capacity for hero worship, and their earnest desire for fair-play.

The *Lives* are full of such little details as these. Small trivalities that bring out the character of the man. Plutarch was not a historian. He was not concerned with the great events in which his heroes moved. But he was concerned with giving a faithful portrait of personality. Scrupulously fair, when he balances his Greek and Roman he does his best to let the best man win. Himself an unconscious educationalist, he holds up the qualities of great men for an example, and patiently sets forth the manner in which they exercised the virtues loved by the gods.

For this very human point of view of his, we, the children, welcome him. We are delighted, as children, with the little stories and intimacies, we are glad not to be confused by a maze of events. We become really interested in the mind of the man, so much more present there than are the great ones of our own country, and we, the children, become intimate with the reckless generosity of Alcibiades, the careful balanced thoughtfulness of Aristides, the impetuous strength of Alexander. With Plutarch's help these men are real to the children in a way that few names can be, that they meet with in the history of their own country.

In the Parents' Union School, we begin to study the *Lives*, one in a term, in what we call Class II., a class that embraces

children of the ages between nine and twelve. The actual words of the translation are read by, or to, the children, and they develop their acquaintance with the hero as the term goes on, usually finishing with a very strong bias of approval or the reverse, and a very clear idea of the personality of the man. Who has done that for the great ones in English History? What *text-book for schools* leaves on a child's mind any clear impression of the *character* of Chatham, Walpole, Cromwell, William III., or Charles Fox? I choose names from a late period purposely, because in the days when kings governed, we do get a feeling of character. The avarice of Henry VIII., the arrogance of William I., the devotion of Harold, the patience of Alfred. Macaulay, who is no longer fashionable, has given us some wonderful word-painting in his essays, but they are not many, and a child will not listen to or follow his periods, with the same ease and delight that he does the English of North or the more scholarly prose of Langhorne.

Children are great moralists. They are also strong individualists. You would find their interest easier to awaken in the Plimsoll line, with its record of the patient work of years by a quiet Quaker, a persevering, humane, persistent, disinterested man, who, having won his part of the battle, had no more a place in the fight of life;—than in the Bill of Rights, for example, though you told them over and over again it is to that we owe largely our English Constitution.

It is the mental picture of the Barons, relentlessly dogging the king, and wresting his signature from him at the point of the sword;—that impotent king, biting his nails on the straw—that makes Magna Charta a reality; not the fine clauses that we honour to-day, and they learn by heart in big print from the book. But English History as commonly taught, is not scattered thickly with character; or rather, historians do not bring forward that first, nor draw first the man and then the work he did. Plutarch, not being a historian, but a biographer, does do this. Therefore, his work from the beginning appeals to children.

We all agree, I think, in considering that character training is the most important part of the education we offer our children. We do not all agree in the methods we adopt for that character-training.

One of our subjects in the Parents' Union School, is what we call "Citizenship." It includes a study of ethical teaching, ancient and modern, and the application to modern times of the virtues of Plutarch's heroes. The children being conversant with the man, his difficulties, temptations, achievements, and disappointments, are led, never obviously, to apply the standard of Greek thought to the life of to-day. There is something so intensely modern about the Athens of Plutarch. The people swayed by eloquence, influenced by display; the jealousy of political rivals, the dread of invasion. I have no wish to draw a parallel, but the children will. They learn a balanced self-observance, an unconscious self-discipline from this hero-worship, ordering their ways and practising self-control in a spirit of emulation that is entirely wholesome.

Before I invite your discussion on what I have said, I should like to read you a sketch of ten lessons taken from the life of Demosthenes, showing how we use the book, and the study of the character of the man grows with the study of his life :—

LESSONS.

I. Early Life	Reflexions on a small town. Parentage—Physical Stature.
II. Ambition	Desire to be a ruler.
His Early Difficulties ..	Knowledge of his own power. <i>cp. Disraeli</i>
III. Excellence his Goal ..	" It does not matter."
IV. Wit and Repartee	Many Examples.
V. Moral Courage, not Physical	Conduct in Battle.
VI. Patriotism	Speeches that Collected an Army.
Contempt of Philip.	
VII. His Weak Points	Love of the Outward Show of Gold.
VIII. Power of his Eloquence ..	The Glitter of Words.
IX. Method of his Death ..	Brave to Die ; Not Brave enough to Live.
X. Pros and Cons	