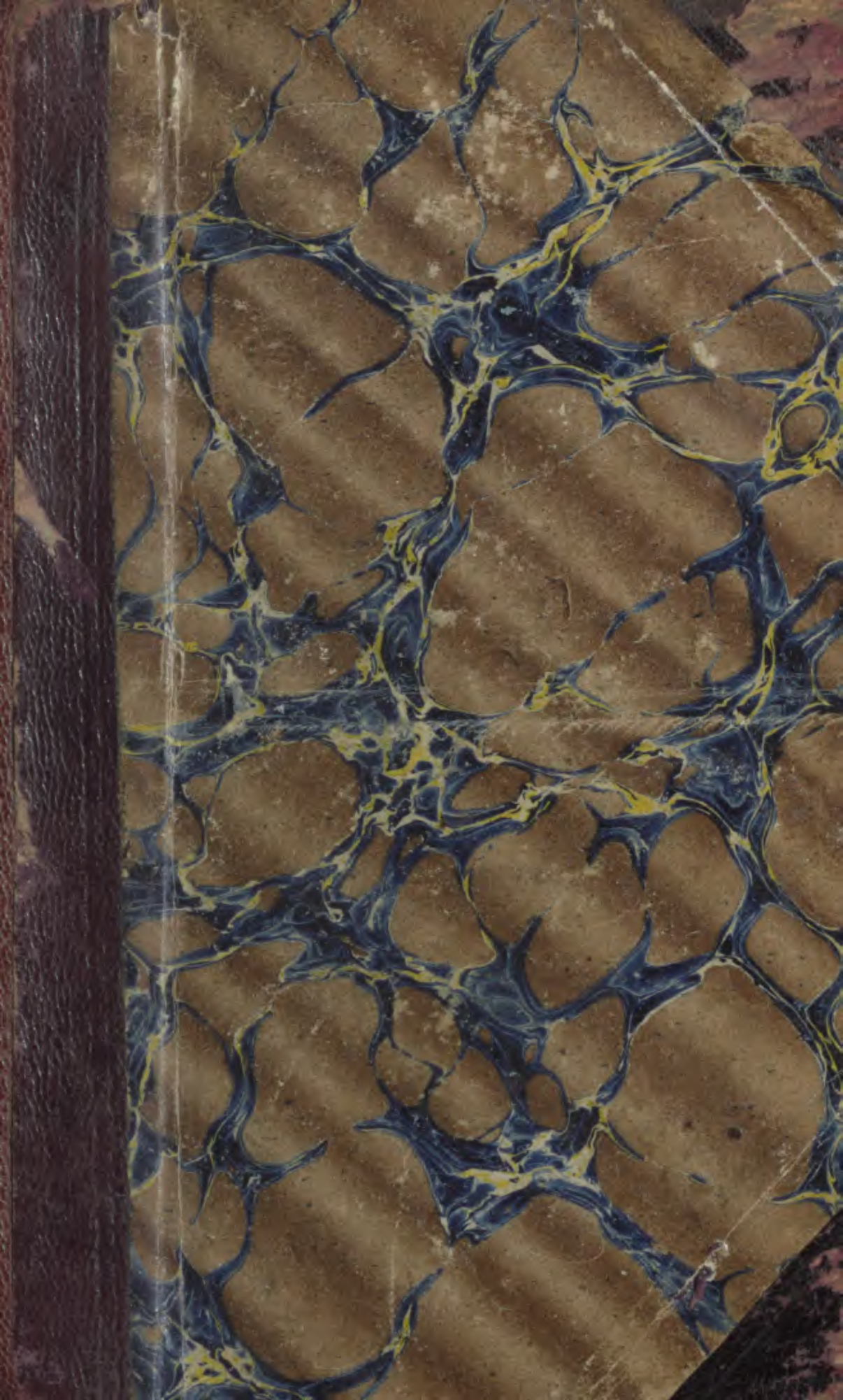

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The Foundation, Construction, and Eternity of Character.

A LECTURE

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

YOUNG MEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION,

BY THE

REV. JOHN ANGELL JAMES,

IN THE

TOWN HALL, BIRMINGHAM, JAN. 9, 1852.

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE LORD CALTHORPE
IN THE CHAIR.

BIRMINGHAM:
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MDCCCLII.

My Lord,

I deem myself both happy and honoured by your Lordship's presiding on this occasion: and I am quite sure the feelings of these young men, to whose assembly and object you have given the patronage of your presence, will be in perfect harmony with my own. Your conduct on this, as well as in other matters, is a demonstration that you consider the coronet never shines with a brighter lustre, than when its influence is devoted to the cause of religion: and you may be assured, my Lord, that the honours of hereditary rank are never regarded by the Commons of this great and happy country, with less envy, or with more approbation, than when they are thus gracefully and usefully employed to foster, and especially among the important class of the community before you, the interests of knowledge, piety, and virtue. This, my Lord, is the object of the Young Men's Christian Association.

LECTURE.

ON THE FOUNDATION, CONSTRUCTION, AND ETERNITY OF CHARACTER.

PERMIT me, my young brethren, to offer you my congratulations not only on the formation, but on the continuance of your truly valuable and deeply interesting Association. Another year has opened upon you with auspices little, if any thing, less propitious than those of any former period of your history. May its progress be as happy as its commencement! I wish it had fallen to other and abler lips than mine, to be the first to address you in this more public meeting: not that you could have found any one more anxious to serve you, or more pleased to do you good: but the gentlemen who are to succeed me, would have been better placed as my leaders than as my followers.

The subject I have selected for the address of this evening is entirely of a practical nature: for you have wisely determined, as a *Christian* Young Men's Association, to consider moral and religious topics as one part of your object, provided they be of such a nature as to exclude controversy; and thus while pursuing truth, to do it in the spirit of christian charity. And you need not to be informed that important as are arts, science, and literature,—religion and morals are infinitely more so; and that not only in regard to the happiness of another world, but of the

life that now is. My subject this evening then, is, the FOUNDATION, THE CONSTRUCTION, AND ETERNITY OF CHARACTER.

It is recorded of Francis the First of France, that after his disastrous defeat in the battle of Pavia, by the Emperor Charles the Fifth of Germany, he announced the catastrophe to his mother in the following terse and magnanimous manner: "*Every thing is lost, but my honour.*" It was a saying worthy of a greater and a better man. Similar to this has been the reflection and expression of others, amidst the calamities of human life:—of men, who, sitting down amidst the ruins of their fortunes, their prospects, and their hopes, have wiped away their tears, and who nobly rising in the consciousness of integrity above their misfortunes, have said, "I have lost every thing but my character:" and with that consciousness, such men are less, far less, to be pitied, than they who have risen to wealth upon the ruins of their reputation. No man can be said to be in abject penury who is rich in whatsoever things are lovely and of good report; while, on the other hand, neither wealth, nor learning, nor science, can dignify a man without character. This is the best capital with which to begin life—which affords the most reasonable hope of success in passing through it—and will yield the sweetest reflections at the close of it.

If it were granted you, at your own expense and under your own directions, to lay the foundations and to raise the walls of some magnificent structure, which should attract the admiration of the world, defy the assaults of time, and hand down your name to future ages, what an object of ambition would be thus placed within your reach. But how much nobler in itself—

how much more valuable to you—and how much more enduring,—is that which is actually proposed to you by the will of God, and which is to be set before you this evening, in the Lecture to which you are now called to listen.

By CHARACTER we mean the prevailing and habitual qualities or dispositions of the mind, which express themselves in appropriate conduct, and distinguish their possessor from other men. The word character is therefore expressive of a *genus*, of which there are many *species;* such as the literary, scientific, heroic, and very many other varieties. In common *parlance*, however, the word is usually employed to designate *moral* qualities, for this is the meaning of the expression,—"He has lost his character." In this sense we consider it in the present Lecture, as indicative of moral and religious habits.

If our description be correct that it consists of prevailing and habitual qualities or dispositions—then of course, a mere occasional act, however splendid an instance of good conduct it may be, does not constitute character—even though it should be also repeated occasionally at long intervals. A miser, for instance, may, under some very peculiar circumstances, be induced to perform an act of even munificent liberality, but it is not his *character* to be liberal. Acts are sometimes done by men so unlike their prevailing disposition, that we are astonished at them as phenomena which exceedingly perplex us when we make inquiry into their cause. Even good men, under the power of temptation, occasionally do things which are very unlike themselves, and contrary to their character, which, however, still survives the shock of these aberrations. General uniformity, consistency, and

perseverance in good conduct then, are essential to character. We have known cases in which some single acts of a bad man, have to all outward appearance, excelled in magnitude and splendour, any of the single acts of a good one—but the former was only a diseased and spasmodic virtue, which exhausted at once all the strength of the actor; while the latter was the continued and natural action of sound health: or to change the metaphor—the one was the rare but imposing splendour of the comet or the meteor, which appears but for a little while and then vanishes away; while the other is the steady, continuous, and directive, though it may be less imposing light, of the pole-star. A fitful virtue is of little value, and yet it is all that some men have, who may not be totally abandoned to *bad* habits. Their minds seem to be ever in an intermittent fever, in which their cold and hot fits are in constant alternation.

Having then endeavoured to shew what we mean by character, and what kind of character we intend in this Lecture, we proceed,—

First. To speak of its FOUNDATION. This word is suggestive. The foundation of a building is laid *in* the earth. How much labour is bestowed in digging and throwing out the soil, and getting a trench ready to receive the materials which are to compose the fabric. How much material is lodged out of sight, that is totally forgotten by the ignorant observers of the structure. Who, for instance, in passing St. Paul's Cathedral, and admiring its lofty dome and gilded cross, dreams of the masses of stone on which the whole rests, and without which the building must soon have been a heap of ruins. Yet there *is* the foundation, vast and deep, though buried, hidden and nearly forgotten. So must it be with character. The foun-

dation must be laid in the mind, and heart, and conscience, and memory. There must be a digging into the soul—a throwing out of much that is in the way of what must be introduced—a making room for much material to be laid there—and a careful and laborious deposit of a suitable substratum. Something strong, broad, firm, must be buried and hidden in the soul. A lofty superstructure of character can no more be raised, which shall stand and be permanent, without this, than a towering building can be a permanent one, that is erected *upon* the surface of the ground, and not *beneath* it. The soul—not in its intellectual aspect and capacity merely, but in its moral and immortal one; the soul with its affections, passions, and propensities; the soul as the seat of will and conscience; the soul as the ground in which the basis of character is laid; must be the subject of serious consideration. Many men carry about their minds with less solicitude than they do their watches: knowing and caring almost as little of the faculties and powers of the one as they do of the mechanism of the other. This must not be with those who would form a good character.

Of what materials then must the foundation of character be formed? What are the mighty and granite stones which must be deposited, for a character that is to stand for eternity? Science? Literature? The arts? No. These may do for the intellectual, but not for the moral character. It is PRINCIPLE, MORAL PRINCIPLE. Moral character cannot rest on astronomy, geology, chemistry, electricity, magnetism. These things are admirable, useful, noble, sublime: but they can no more do for the basis of character, than jewellery, or diamonds, or the telescope, or the galvanic battery, or the magnet, would do for the foundation of a pyramid or a temple. By principle I mean not

opinions only, but convictions: not speculative theories on morals, but practical conclusions: not sentiments floating in the judgment, but rooted in the heart. I will enumerate a few of these—The eternal, necessary, and immutable, and not merely conventional, distinction between good and evil, right and wrong, morally considered—the invariable tendency of what is good to happiness, and of what is evil to misery—the only unerring rule of good and evil is the Bible, which does not create right and wrong, but reveals and recognises them—the corruption and weakness of human nature morally viewed—the supremacy of love to God and love to man, as the first principles of human conduct—the necessity of a renovation of the human heart, and the provision made in the scheme of man's redemption by Christ, through the agency of the Divine Spirit for this purpose. These, and such as these, are the mighty stones which, dug from the quarry of the Bible, and laid in the human heart by the power of a living faith, constitute the foundation of that character which is to exhibit its beautiful proportions on earth, rise to heaven, and to endure through eternity. These are the principles which must be laid in the depths of the human soul, by an intelligent apprehension of their nature—a deep conviction of their truth—and an impressive sense of their importance. To attempt to form a character without established principles, is like erecting a building without a foundation.

SECONDLY. But character, like building, is not all foundation, there is superstructure also; and we now go on to consider its CONSTRUCTION:—and we remark, that in the present case, if principles are the basis, virtues are the edifice—in other words, moral *truth* developed in moral *action*.

Just glance at the virtues which constitute the elements of every well-formed character. The first of these is *piety* towards God—or the belief of the first truth—the enjoyment of the chief good—the acknowledgment of our highest relations—and submission to the supreme authority. This is the highest reach of virtue—the loftiest aspiration of humanity—the very sublime of created excellence. Then comes *prudence*, or the subjection of all our words and actions to the laws of wisdom, and a just regard to the consequences which actions bring after them, remote as well as proximate, either as they affect our own comfort, or the comfort of others. An inflexible *integrity* is necessary, which no storm of adversity can bend or break, and no sunshine of prosperity can relax; which could pursue what is right, both towards God and man, and because it is right, to bonds, imprisonment, and death. A rigid *self-control* is indispensable—a power, which under the direction of wisdom, can restrain the strongest innate impulses, and save the man from being hurried on from within to folly or vice; can hold in check the most violent temptations, whether they appeal to cupidity, ambition, or sensuality; which will assert the freedom of the soul against the attempts of the appetites and the passions, to bring it into bondage; which can endure the most heroic self-denial, and become a martyr to principle, rather than do an action which, whatever it may gain of pleasure or of wealth, sinks the actor in his own esteem.

> "Reader, attend, whether thy soul
> Soars fancy's flight beyond the Pole,
> Or darkling grubs this earthly hole
> In low pursuit—
> Know, prudent, cautious SELF-CONTROL,
> Is wisdom's root."

"It is this which saves a man from being a slave, and makes him master of himself. What noble powers and lofty geniuses have been wrecked and ruined for want of this virtue. Need I refer to a great poet, the failure of whose life, was his failure in this endowment. With the largest mental endowments; the strongest susceptibilities; a capacity for the loftiest sentiments, he fell under the dominion of the animal appetites and passions, and perished in the meridian of life. His noble powers were too often prostituted, ere they became extinguished at what should be the highest point of culmination. What a fall—for such a soul to sink under the dominion of sense; to abnegate its high dignity, and yield itself to the same kind of forces which move the mere animal."* *Benevolence*, or a practical regard to the happiness of others, is a prime and glorious element of character. This is the temper of angels, the law of heaven, the brightest, the truest, the only resemblance of God. Selfishness is beast-like, demon-like, but benevolence is God-like. To omit this, would be to leave out the richest distinction of which humanity is susceptible. To allude to the last element of moral character, we might mention a delicate sense of the *generous*, the *noble*, the *honourable*. When we speak of honour, we do not mean that morbid sense of offence which spreads over the whole soul as one vast, tender, and diseased membrane, that is susceptible of insult and injury to every touch, though gentle as the brush of an insect's wing; which makes a man choleric, resentful, and prompt to draw his sword even upon a friend, to revenge an insult. We recommend no such honour as this, a temper that feeds upon opinion, and is as

"McCombie's Foundations of Individual Character." An admirable Tract.

fickle as its food; which often persuades men to destroy their peace, in order to defend their pride, and to pull down their house to build their monument.

Such are the *materials*, and others might have been mentioned, out of which that noble edifice we call character is to be constructed. But let us now consider how the fabric is to be carried forward; or in other words, what *rules* must be observed in its construction. It is first of all necessary, *to fix upon your object*—to determine with yourself what you would be. The builder of a house has his whole plan before him before he lays a brick or deposits a stone; the poet has the plan of his poem before he writes a line; and the painter and sculptor their model before a stroke is given of the pencil or the chisel. So if *you* would attain to a well-formed character, you must first settle with yourselves what you would be,—and what are the real elements of a good character. A mistake here is fundamental. No man can well be expected to rise higher than his own standard of excellence. Say to yourselves then, "What *ought* I to be? What *would* I be? What *shall* I be?" Settle this well,—wisely and firmly.

It is also a first principle, that every man must be, under God, *the builder of his own character:* for no man can do it for him. He may have a house built for him, and indeed must if he have a house at all; but here, if he have a *character* at all, he must build for himself. God has condescended to become his *architect*, and laid down a perfect plan for him in his Word, and others by counsel and direction may assist him; but no assistance of this kind *can* dispense with his own labour. He may have money left to him, so that by possibility he may become rich without his own

efforts; but no one can bequeath character to him. His own industry alone can obtain it.

Next to this, it is of immense importance to understand that as no others can construct character for us, so neither will it *come of itself* or of chance; but must be the result of design and of effort. You may as rationally expect that a palace, or a temple, or a castle, would rise up by a fortuitous concourse of atoms, as that good habits will be formed by a contingent concurrence of actions or events. No. There must be a plan laid, a purpose formed, a rule observed, and an end invariably sought. A bad character may be formed almost without design: a man has only to yield himself up passively to the impulse of his innate evil propensities, and the force of external temptation, to be bad without effort: just as weeds, brambles, and nettles grow in the wilderness without culture; while delicate garden flowers, or hot-house plants, must have much labour bestowed upon them. But is it not worth the trouble? A good reputation will better repay the labours bestowed upon it, than any other thing that can be contemplated by the human mind.

To advance another step, we may observe, that you not only *should*, but *can* construct your own character. Have faith in God first of all, that he is willing and waiting to assist you, and then faith in yourselves; that by his blessing you can *be* something, *do* something, and *own* something, in this world. You cannot be ciphers but by your own choice; and by that same choice may be something in the arithmetic of life far beyond. Others, as we have said, cannot do it for you, but you *may* do it for yourself. It may seem a bold assertion, but it is a true one, *you may be*

morally whatsoever you resolve to be. God has set no limit short of perfection upon the attainment of moral excellence: nor should we. Resolution is all but omnipotent. The power of man's will is wonderful. The greatest difficulty lies in having power *to* will, not in the power *of* will. Here is one of the great differences between man and man, not only a difference as to grasp of intellect, but of power to will. Many can *see* as clearly as others, but they cannot *will* as resolutely. Hence it is of importance to cultivate the will as well as the intellect, the heart, and the memory. Determine to be something in the world and you will be something. Aim at excellence and excellence will be attained. "I cannot" has never accomplished any thing. "I will" has achieved wonders. It is surprising to see how difficulties clear away before the all-subduing power of some men's will, and how all things fall into their schemes: no, not *fall*, but are *pressed*, into them. This is true in reference to almost all things,—to wealth—to ambition—to knowledge; but it is truest of all in relation to character. Should there be any one listening to me at this moment, who has not yet attained to any high degrees of moral excellence; who has not yet formed a resolution to reach it; who has yielded perhaps to a desponding apprehension that it is beyond his reach; let him this night, only take up, as he is authorised, yea, commanded to do, the all-conquering "I will, by God's help," and the commencement is made of moral excellence; of a good and noble character. This is what the most eloquent of modern essayists has exhibited with such force and beauty in his Essay on "DECISION OF CHARACTER."

Oh that I could inspire you, my young friends, at

the very outset of life with an enthusiasm on this subject. Oh that I could awaken, or foster—if it be implanted already—the lofty purpose of forming a character which earth shall admire and heaven approve. Oh that I could breathe into you the purpose, not hastily or slightly, but deliberately and determinately formed, to *be* and *do* something in this world of your dwelling, and during this short life of your continuance in it. I see the career of unlimited excellence opening before you, and only needing the mighty volition to pursue it with success. Tell me not of disheartening discouragements, or of powerful temptations; I know them, I have felt them, and by the grace of God, I have conquered them: and what I have done, you may do. It was amidst those very temptations, and some discouragements, when younger than most of you, the lecturer made up his mind, not indeed to be a *great* man, for such an ambitious aspiration or idea never approached the horizon of his mind; but to the humbler wish, as it might be thought by some, to be a *good* man. It was in youth he resolved to build up a character, and commenced the effort. How far he has succeeded, he leaves others to determine. At any rate, to that resolution he owes, under God, the honour of addressing you on the present occasion.

It is of immense importance to recollect that comparatively *minute circumstances*, *events*, and *influences*, contribute to the formation of character. Men are very slow to learn the power and importance of *little* things, and the cumulative value of seeming trifles. In the world of morals nothing is little. A glance of the eye, a momentary opening of the ear, a single thought passing through the mind with the rapidity of light-

ing, if indulged on a forbidden subject, may leave trace never to be effaced, and do mischief never o be undone through eternity. In the corporeal ame a pin-scratch may lead on to mortification; and eath may enter in the invisible miasma of pestilence. or is it otherwise with our moral constitution. Great vents and potent causations occur only at long inter-als; small ones are always going on and are ever de-ositing their products. It is very true, the first bold onception and broad outline of character, like the pic-ure of the artist, is drawn by a single effort, perhaps bold dash of his pencil or his chalk; but the filling p of the sketch is the result of innumerable little dots nd strokes; and every dot and every stroke is the re-ult of deliberation and design. One or two dots or trokes of wrong colour, or put in at a wrong place, ould mar the whole. Not very unlike this is the rocess we are now considering. Often is a resolution or future conduct formed, adopted, and fixed in an our, yea a minute—which comprehends in itself the ormation of a character, the history of a life, the moral xistence of an eternity; all of which hung upon the de-ision of that brief term; but then there comes the lling-up of the picture: to this, the little events that re occurring every day and in every place, are contri-uting an influence. Nor must it be forgotten, how uch one or two improper acts, in comparatively little hings, may hinder the right formation, or deface the eauty, of the moral picture of character. How much ime and labour it may require to counteract the bad nfluence which has been thus exerted.

It sometimes happens that *a single occurrence* is he hinge on which a man's whole character for life nay turn. One violent temptation, accordingly as it

is successfully resisted or complied with, may have the effect of a fixed determination for good or for evil. You will probably remember the instance that Foster gives in his Essay "On Decision of Character," of the young man who had wasted his paternal estate by his profligacy, and who upon surveying the lost property from a neighbouring hill, came to the determination to recover it again. The resolution was formed, and he immediately began to put it in execution, and succeeded. But I will relate a fact still more in point, which I think I have given in one of my other publications. An eminent minister of religion, a native of this town, when a youth, was engaged in secular pursuits, and apprenticed as well as born and educated here. From some cause or other he determined to abscond. On the morning of his elopement, he passed through the room in which his employer usually sat in the evening; on the table was a heap of mixed, and evidently uncounted money. The youth paused—he was going out ill-provided with cash, and gazed for a few seconds upon the tempting heap; it was suggested to him, he needed it—his master would not miss it if he took some; and if he did miss it, he who took it, could at some future time replace it. It was a crisis of his moral history. Temptation was strong and urgent. Principle came to his relief, and he exclaimed, "No, I will not touch a farthing. I am determined not to go out a thief." Had he yielded to the temptation, his character by that one act would have taken an entirely different turn to what it did, and he might have ended a swindler, instead of becoming a minister of religion. To the latest hour of his life, he never thought of his resolution but with gratitude, as having considerable influence in the formation of his character.

What is said of *little things* may be also said of *present time.* Character is not something to *be* formed, but is ever *being* formed. It is not only a future, but a present process. It is evolving from every occurring event, and it is suspended upon every passing moment. So that if you ask, Where character is formed, we reply, Every where. When? Always. By what means? By every thing. What we would be in general, that we should be in detail. What we would be in great things, that we should be in little ones: and what we would be through all futurity, that we should be in this passing moment.

Beware of eccentricity and oddities. We have all known characters, otherwise very good and commendable, sadly disfigured by these things. There was something so odd and queer, simply ludicrous, without being at all vicious, that they looked, forgive the simile, like a squint in what would have been otherwise a really beautiful face; or like a great wen upon a fair and symmetrical form. I am aware some persons have aimed at being *peculiar*, though they have small pretence to *originality:* and rather than be like other people, would be distinguished by the deformity of the squint, and the wart upon their character. Despise such silly affectation, and be content with general uniformity of excellence, and thus with being in all things commonly beautiful in character, rather than covet to be distinguished by what is uncommonly, though perhaps only laughably ugly.

And as there are eccentricities to be avoided, so there are *decorations* of character to be studied and acquired. To advert again to the construction of a building, it may be made of substantial materials, and may have many good rooms, and answer well enough

the purpose of a habitation, but all the while it may have a barn-like appearance. There are none of the tasteful ornaments of architecture—no Ionic grace—no Corinthian elegance, nor even Doric chasteness. Or to refer to the human form, there may be symmetry, strength, even beauty, but the bearing may be low and vulgar, the manners repulsive, and the address unprepossessing. Is it not sometimes thus with character? There may be the possession of sterling integrity, and great moral worth; in short, all the things that are true, and honest, and pure, and just; but not the things that are lovely. There is wanting the amiable temper, the courteous address, the attraction of kindness. It is a fine body in an uncomely dress; it is a lump of gold, but amorphous and unburnished; it is a diamond not cut and flashing with all the hues of the rainbow, but dull and covered with all its earthy encrustations. Character is the best thing on earth; why not then invest it with all the charms of which it is susceptible, and compel men to love and admire it as they do a jewel; both for its own sake, and for the sake of its beautiful setting also. The character of every man, far more than his wealth, is public property—and should be so exhibited as not only to attract attention, but to excite admiration and emulation. We must endeavour to make virtue loved as well as esteemed.

Be conversant with the best models, whether living or biographical. Painters, sculptors, and architects, who would excel, study the productions of the best masters, and think nothing of the expense and labour of a journey to Rome, or Athens, or Florence, to drink in the inspirations produced by a contemplation of the works of Raphael and Rubens, Phidias and Michael

Angelo. On a mind athirst for moral excellence, a similar effect is produced by the perusal of the lives of men distinguished for their piety and virtue. Heroism is imbibed at the statues of heroes: patriotism at those of patriots; and piety and virtue at those of Christians and moralists. And if the tombs of the illustrious dead assist us in the cultivation of their virtues, how much more does intercourse with living persons of distinguished excellence! What is the memory or the statue, for its moral effect, compared with living, speaking, breathing, acting patterns of distinguished piety and virtue! Oh, you say, to have spent one day with Howard, or Wilberforce, or one of the martyrs, or reformers, and to have heard the utterances of their piety—to have seen the beauty of their virtue—how would it have aided us in our attempts after moral excellence! Perhaps not so much as your intercourse with some other characters to whom I might refer you —I mean those of your own age, sex, and circumstances—who hold fast their integrity, and are patterns of every excellence; who are tried with your trials—assailed by your temptations: and yet are believers amidst scoffers—pure amidst the licentious—diligent amidst the idle—and honest amidst the thievish. He that walketh with wise men shall be wise. Neighbouring fires brighten each others' flame—trees in a plantation aid each others' growth—and both virtue and vice gain courage from companionship. Precept is the rule for the formation of character—example is the plastic power which moulds it. Hence the immense and obvious advantages of such associations as that which I have the pleasure to address this evening. True it is that there is something partaking of the moral sublime in an instance of eminent solitary piety

and virtue, standing firm and alone, uncorrupted and incorruptible, amidst surrounding corruption; resisting alike the silent but powerful influence of example, the arts of persuasion, and the frown of authority. Such an instance resembles a noble column standing erect amidst ruins, or the lofty and majestic oak, flourishing in solitude amidst a wilderness, strong without companions, and unsheltered and unprotected, bidding defiance to the fury of the elements. But how few trees, if planted in such an exposed situation, *could* stand erect, and grow and thrive. How much do the generality need the support and protecting influence of the clump or the plantation. And is it not so with the young, as regards the formation of their character? Do they not need association—fellowship—and all the directive and sustaining influence of companionship? Hence, I repeat, the value of such institutions as this, in which the young trees of moral nature and growth, protect, support, and assist each other, under the patronage of some veterans of the forest, which, while they seem to exhibit models for their growth, cover them with the shield of their noble tops, and spread over them their boughs to defend them from the scorching heat of the sun, and the tempestuous force of the hurricane.

I now advance a remark which deserves the most concentrated and serious attention of this whole assembly, as of momentous importance. *Character, whether it be good or bad, is usually formed in youth, and formed then for both worlds.* We admit that this is not always the case. Transformations sometimes take place in after-life, as great and striking as they are unexpected and beautiful. Vicious, profligate, and unmerciful men are changed into patterns of chastity,

temperance, and benevolence, a change as great as if a temple rose on the ruins of a brothel, a palace on the site of a pig-sty, a mansion of domestic peace where had been a den of wild beasts, and an abode of angels where was a pandemonium of fiends. But these instances are rare. Character, I repeat, is usually formed in youth. From fourteen to twenty-one is the crisis of being—the hinge of destiny—the era for eternity. In childhood the soul is too soft to receive impression, in age too hard; but youth is just that plastic state which receives and retains it. There is a certain stage in the early growth of an apple or a tree, when if characters are drawn upon the rind or the bark, they will not only remain but grow with its growth, and enlarge with its increase, and be perpetuated through the whole existence of the fruit or the tree. So is it with the characters which are impressed upon the mind—what it receives in youth it usually retains through the whole period of its future existence.

But this leads on to the THIRD part of this Lecture, which is to consider THE ETERNITY of character. It is not in the power of the human intellect, nor of the divine one either, to conceive of any thing in relation to this subject more momentous or more sublime than this; in the declaration of which I almost wish I could make the annunciation with the voice of the archangel and the trump of God. I shall not here enter into any proof of the immortality of the soul, and a future state of reward and punishment. I shall take these momentous and awful truths for granted. Nor shall I dwell long on the ineffably sublime idea of eternity—that endless duration of existence which mocks the power of arithmetic to calculate, and of the human or angelic mind to grasp. Eternity is an

idea which can find no room to expand to all its height, and depth, and length, and breadth, but in the infinite mind of Him, who only in the full sense of the term is ETERNAL; or from everlasting to everlasting. The future eternity, if we may be allowed the paradox of thus speaking of what has no relation to time, belongs to man, and is the measure of his existence. What do I look round upon, in surveying the audience which is before me? Not the ephemeral beings, the flitting shadows, which, as dying creatures, they may appear to be. No, there is upon every man the stamp of immortality: there is a spirit which shall fly beyond the flaming bounds of space and time.

> "The stars shall fade away, the sun himself
> Grow dim with age, and nature sink in years,
> But thou shalt flourish in immortal youth,
> Unhurt amidst the war of elements,
> The wreck of matter, and the crash of worlds."

This is not merely the noble effusion of poetry, but the decision of that precious volume which abolishes death and brings life and immortality to light: a decision which raises the subject of immortality above the dreams of imagination, the speculations of philosophy, and the yearnings after existence inseparable from the nature of man, to place it among the realities of truth, the objects of faith, and the anticipations of hope. Such is the glorious possession, young men, of which infidelity and false philosophy would rob you; and by this dreadful felony would reduce you to its own miserable beggary, with no prospect but the grave, and no object of hope but annihilation. Such the dignity from which it would cast you down to the degradation of dying like a dog, after living like a man. Eternal God, on what are thine enemies and

the foes of our race intent! How insane a project! How parricidal a zeal! To cover thy throne and our grave with the funeral pall of perpetual death—to bury thy Divinity and our humanity together in one everlasting grave—and hush thy Name and our praises of it, in the unbroken silence of eternal night. Vain attempt! let them endeavour to extinguish the sun, and annihilate the planets: this were an easy task compared with their endeavour to tear from the soul of man his convictions of the existence of a God, and his hope of his own immortality.

Now through eternity there must be some character. No one can be negative there, any more than here. We are always to be rational creatures, and of course, are for ever to partake of some moral qualities; and these qualities are acquired in this world. All the positive information we *can* acquire upon this subject must be obtained from Revelation: yet even reason suggests the probability of an eternity of character; or in other words, the perpetuity through eternity of the character we acquire in this world. We should entertain a presumption of this, if we reasoned only from analogy. It is true, that death separates the two states, and some may think will make a considerable and radical difference in the condition of the soul. But why? Death is wholly a physical change, operating only, as far as we know, upon the material part of our nature—the throwing down of the walls of the prison to let the captive escape. Disease of itself effects no moral change, and why should death? The moral consciousness remains in continuous and unchanged existence. Not only the same faculties continue, but the same moral qualities.

But what reason renders probable, Revelation renders certain: every part of the sacred volume represents this world as a state of discipline and probation for the next—as bearing the same relation to a future world that boyhood and youth do to manhood. God has sent us here to acquire an eternal moral character. And he gives us the opportunity to do so. And we in reality do it. We may, if we so choose, obtain a bad one; there are incentives and temptations which will lead to it if we yield to them. But there are also opportunities and facilities, if we will avail ourselves of them, of an *opposite* nature. Time decides for eternity. The probation ends with life, and death sets the seal not only on destiny, but on character. From that moment the good are good, and the bad are bad for ever. The one are removed, as they are, into a state where moral excellence will have no more check to its developement, nor any more temptations to corrupt it: and in the case of those who are bad, where sin will have no means for its resistance or suppression. All then, pass under the sentence, "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still; and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still; and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still; and he that is holy, let him be holy still." The image of the heavenly is thus stamped upon the soul on earth, and the likeness of the eternal in time. The ultimate moral purpose of Christianity is to produce an everlasting character, and for that end to confer the elements of it in this world,—to originate in each man's history and moral being an infinite series of moral actions; to commence an endless progression in holy conduct, and an eternal practice and enjoyment of all that is true, and beautiful, and good. The present is thus the parent of the future: character on earth is the bud

of character in heaven. All the moral elements of eternity are acquired and found in the soul during its temporary sojourn here. Each man walks the earth an incipient seraph, or a premonitory fiend. Every moral thing we do stretches far beyond the sphere of its doing: it is a causation for eternity. Eternal issues are the result of every action, the embodiment of every thought, the echo of every word. What we are now is the certain prediction of what we shall be for ever. Every action partaking of moral quality, whether of a good or a bad man, leaves upon the tablet of the soul, a mark which will be legible there, millions of ages hence. Moral character works out its own issues—digs its own hell, or builds its own heaven. In each case it is in another world, the natural and necessary consummation of man's present self in this. He puts off the mortal and puts on the immortal—but as is the mortal, such also is the immortal. Man is called a shadow as to his transient existence, but as to his character, he is the shadow which a coming eternity casts before it.

How much is there in man's history that is *not* eternal—gifts, wealth, rank, fame, connexions, are all of the earth earthly, and perish in the using: they form part of the fashion of this world, that gay and glittering pageant which passeth away; but character remaineth. Whatever is *not* eternal, character is. Whatever else we may drop on the borders of the grave, this we shall carry with us, in us, into whatever state we then enter. It cannot be separated from ourselves, for it is ourselves. If we love and respect it, we shall retain the object of our affection for ever: and if we loathe and despise it, we must still retain it for ever. How instructive and impressive is this to every man, of every age and

every condition of life; but especially to the young: for as it is in youth that character is formed for manhood and all future life, so of course youth is the period of forming it for eternity.

Happy will it be for you, my young friends, if this night your attention should be drawn to this momentous subject. Character, as regards this world, is of unspeakable importance to yourself. Can you possess any self-respect without it? How terrible is it to be self-despised—to be vile in our own estimation—to be the object of scorn to ourselves. But on the other hand, how delightful is it to possess that self-esteem which is as far from pride and self-conceit on the one side, as it is from a spurious and affected modesty on the other. It is not humility, but ignorance, which deprives a man of the enjoyment of conscious rectitude: true humility consists in thinking of ourselves neither higher nor lower than we ought to do: nor is it necessary to the exercise of this virtue we should deprive ourselves of all the enjoyments of a good conscience.

Character will be a shield in some instances against temptation, for where it is very eminent, the seducer will think it too high to reach, or too impregnable to be stormed. In other cases, it has constituted a defence against slander, by placing its possessor above suspicion. Oftentimes it is taken at once as a guarantee for innocence against imputation. A man of well-established reputation is safe in the confidence of those who know him. They acquit him without a trial, and believe his innocence without the judgment of a court. Slander may indeed fix its fangs for a moment upon a spotless character; but such a character has within itself an antidote to the poison, and rises

from the temporary wound with invigorated strength and brightened beauty. Character secures the esteem of the wise and the good, and even bad men pay it the tribute of their admiration, and the compliment of their envy. An inordinate craving after applause is a morbid condition of the soul, the feverish thirst of disease; but a just appreciation of the unsought esteem of those whose discriminating and judicious praise is never bestowed but upon what deserves it, is at once an exercise and reward of virtue. Character will aid you in your endeavour to do good and to obtain your proper standing in society. "*Character is power: character is influence.*" Men are moved not only by *what* is said, but by who says it. Reputation gives weight to advice, inspires confidence, and attracts co-operation. Success in life depends upon it. Character, if not capital, often supplies the place of it. It is one of the ladders of ascent to wealth and respectability. It is not only a benefit to yourselves, but to others. It is a rich contribution to domestic comfort—an essential to the smooth and easy working of the great commercial system—the breakwater which resists the tidal waves and ocean-storms of moral evil, that are ever threatening to inundate the interests of society—a rebuke to the bad, an encouragement to the good—a model for imitation to the present generation—and a rich legacy and a posthumous benefit to the generation to come. A man's character outlives himself and lasts as long as his name: it is his most enduring monument and his truest history; and therefore every one is under solemn obligation to consult his posthumous power to do good or harm. The reminiscences of his virtues or his vices may be withering or fostering the interests of society when he is sleeping in his grave.

But to return, in conclusion, to the eternal aspect of character. How anxious, how careful, and how laborious have been some men, to build up a reputation which posterity shall know and admire. When the poet was reproached for the slowness of his verses, how impressive and dignified was his reply, "I write for immortality." Young men, you are living, speaking, acting for immortality—always and every where building up a character that is to last through eternity. It is an awful thought, under the weight of which the strongest mind might stagger—in the contemplation of which the boldest might tremble—and in the comprehension of which the most ambitious might find a boundless scope for its aspirations and its pursuits.

Is it not wise sometimes to ask ourselves the question, "What we shall be hereafter?" How soon is it spoken, but who shall reply? Think how profoundly this question, this mystery, concerns us—in comparison with this, what are all the other questions which curiosity or science may ask. What to us the future career of events—or the progress of states and empires—or the history of our globe—or of our whole material universe? What *we* shall be—*we* ourselves—is the matter of infinite and surpassing interest. How overpowered are we in attempts to realize to thought, what nevertheless will be so!—"I that am man—that am here—that am thus,—what shall I be—and where—and how—when this vast system of nature has passed away?" What, after ages more than there are leaves or blades of grass on the whole surface of this globe, or atoms in its enormous mass, shall have expired! Through all that inconceivable period, that infinite, eternal duration, there will still be the conscious *I*

am. Can it be possible then we should not now ask, *What* shall I be? What character shall I bear.*

Is it too sermonic—not certainly with the members of a Young Men's Christian Association—to recommend for such an object the devout study of the holy Scriptures, and earnest prayer, for the aid of the Holy Spirit? That precious volume is the best mould in which the character can be cast, even for time, and it is the only one in which it can be cast for eternity. Be much in converse with your Bible. It is the seal of the Spirit of God. Yield your *mind* to the faith of its doctrines—your *heart*, softened by the power of prayer, to the impression of its precepts, and your life to the influence of its examples; for in so doing you will receive a character, which after having procured many of the advantages, and much of the happiness of earth; after having constituted your richest honour and noblest distinction among your fellow-mortals, shall accompany you to the Paradise of God, where the bud of every virtue, now often exposed to ungenial blasts and nipping frosts, shall blossom in unfading beauty, beyond the reach of temptation, or the taint of corruption. Or, to change the figure, where that character here now copied, though but imperfectly, from the moral attributes of God, shall be perfect even as he is perfect: and by flourishing in immortal loveliness, shall realise the subject of this Lecture—THAT ETERNITY WILL BE THE DURATION OF THAT CHARACTER WHICH IS FOUNDED ON RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLE, AND CONSTRUCTED OF CHRISTIAN VIRTUES.

* See "Foster's Lecture on our Ignorance of our Future Mode of Existence."

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