BEGIN AT HOME:

A NEW YEAR'S ADDRESS TO PARENTS.

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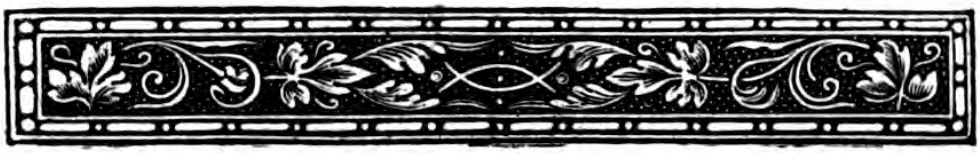

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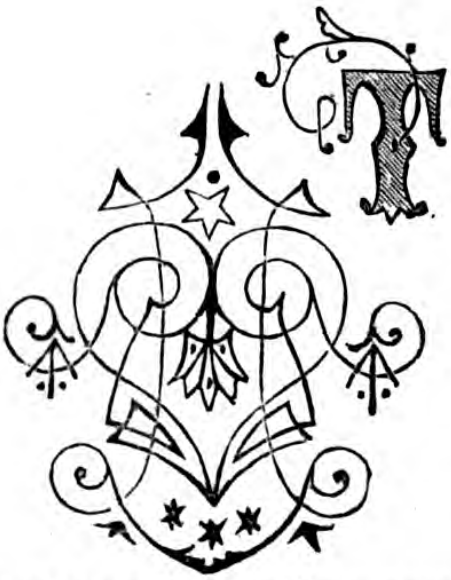

THE bells that rang in the New Year are already hushed. We have exchanged our congratulations. The merry greeting of the children still perhaps lingers in our ears. And now we are about to go our way as we went yesterday. But surely at such a season it is well to pause and think a little. Will the year to come be like the year that is past? Is there anything we would alter? Fathers and mothers, whose thoughts naturally go first to your little ones, bear with us if at such a time we speak to you in sober words of serious things.

A new path lies before you, all untrodden: where will it lead you? Across the level plains of life, where the sun scorches and the feet weary? Through

the Valley of Contentment or up the Hill Difficulty? Over stony places, or along the green pastures and by the still waters? Or down to the "beautiful river," of which we sometimes sing, beyond which gleams the Golden City? Where will it lead you—that path on which you have taken the first step? Strange as it may seem, there is no standing still upon it; hour by hour, step by step, the traveller must go forward, till the end is reached.

One thing we do know, certainly, for God has taught us it, and all human experience confirms it, that the character of the year to come must depend very much upon ourselves. What may happen to us is of far less account than the spirit in which we meet it. The true life is within.

> "We live in deeds, not words; in thoughts, not breaths;
> In feelings, not in figures on a dial,
> We should count time by heart-throbs. He most lives
> Who thinks most, feels the noblest, acts the best."

What then can we do to make this year, if God spares us, better and happier than the last?

We have just celebrated our great home festival, for such Christmas has become. What family gatherings! Well may we rejoice in the thousands of happy homes scattered over the land. Thank God for the merry troops of boys and girls, and for the babes, the object of so many tender caresses.

> "Drear were the world without a child,
> Where helpless infant never smiled,
> Nor stirred a mother's love;
> We sooner could the flowerets spare,
> The tender bud or blossom fair,
> Or breath of springtime in the air,
> Or light of dawn above."

Yet in the happiest home there is need of wisdom; and, alas! how many a home that might be happy is clouded by carelessness or sin.

Not long ago one of the greatest of living Englishmen met a clerical acquaintance in the streets; he inquired if he was going to preach, and was answered, Yes. "My sermon," said this sternest of teachers, "would be short enough. If I went into the pulpit, I should say, Now, friends, you know your duty; in the name of God and of the Other Person, go and do it." All men and women know enough to do better, and if we could but bring our practice at home up to the level of our knowledge, it would be the surest way of realising a happy new year. To live up to our knowledge is to be ever growing in wisdom; to do our best is to be always doing better. The summons to such a life comes in the name of God, for it is He who renders to every man according to his work, and who gives the strength and help that each day requires; and it comes also in the name of that "Other Person"—unseen, shadowy, terrible: for the devil is a taskmaster who can make curses of our good intentions, and a scourge of our neglected duties. Resolve, then, by the grace of God to begin your reforms at the point where your own knowledge accuses you of failure.

There are many people, however, who are always planning to do better, and yet never succeed. They tell a story in one of the islands of the South Seas, which, while it shows that human nature has similar faults all the world over, is not without instruction for us at home. A man once heard of a very fruitful land, called "Te-enua-kura," or "The-Island-of-red-parrot-feathers," which abounded in delicious fruits and

fragrant flowers, and was bright with birds of gorgeous plumage. With the help of his son, he built a large canoe, in order that he might visit this pleasant region; but before the father was ready to start, one night the son went off by himself, wishing to get there first. The old man afterwards provided himself with another canoe, and likewise set out for this wonderful country. When half-way there, he saw his son paddling away, to no purpose, against a strong current. The father inquired, "What are you doing, my son?" The son replied, "I am paddling, trying to get on." Unable to help his son, the father kept on his course, and safely reached the beautiful island. After spending a year there in the enjoyment of everything he could desire, he returned home. On his way back he saw his son still paddling as before, without having made any progress. Again he asked, "What are you doing, my son?" And again he was answered, "I am paddling, trying to get on." Mr. Gill heard a native teacher relate this tradition, as an illustration of the manner in which many persons set out for heaven, but never get there, ever learning but never arriving at the knowledge of the truth.

How many people amongst ourselves are in like plight! Ask them about their souls, and they can only answer that they are "*trying to get on.*" Ask them about their homes, and they can only say, they are "*trying to get on.*" Ask them about their business or their work, and they can find no better reply than, "*I am paddling, trying to get on.*" They have no experience beyond the toil and the weariness; they make no way; they gather no fruits. Now, why is this? Perhaps the current is too strong for their own unaided arm; perhaps they

lack tact or skill; perhaps they do not put their whole strength into the task. Whatever may be the reason of their failure, take care this new year to put your own resolutions to daily test. Beware of "busily doing nothing"—of idle "paddling"—of vague intentions; have clear, definite aims, and let every stroke carry you forward.

There is an old saying that "charity begins at home." There is so much truth in it, that the devil has often quoted it to keep men from holy enterprises abroad. Some one has called it on that account "a neat pocket edition of selfishness," but, though abused as all good things are, it contains much wisdom. Charity does find its first duties at home. Sydney Smith used to tell the story of a man who was so much affected by hearing a charity sermon, that he emptied both his neighbours' pockets into the collection plate. It was a droll way of showing another side of the same truth. The proverb might, indeed, take other forms: happiness begins at home; righteousness begins at home; love begins at home; patience begins at home; courtesy begins at home; industry begins at home. And so, whoever purposes to do better, must *begin at home.*

The heart is the core of the home, using that word in its strict family sense; the heart is the well-spring of home affections, and of home happiness. In the home some of the sweetest joys and hardest tasks of life lie close together; but the character of the home, and the nature of its influence, will depend upon the heart that governs there.

First, then, if you would order your home aright, *look to your own life.* Better is he that "ruleth his

spirit than he that taketh a city ;" and in the family, self control is one of the first virtues : you cannot govern your children if you cannot govern yourself. Neither can you exact obedience from them unless you yourself can show them how to obey : you may enforce submission, but that is not obedience, for a state of subjection is akin to servitude, whereas intelligent obedience is happy freedom. Neither can you teach them unless you are yourself willing to be taught : the tree of knowledge is a tree of life, your children want not dead leaves but living fruit. Neither can you train them without understanding and sympathy, that need to be kept free from selfish prejudice or taint. And how can you set before them the duties of religion, if you yourselves despise religion ? How can you bring them to Christ, if you yourselves have not found Him? Or point them to the home beyond the grave, if your own eyes are turned away from it ?

It may be that some of you have cared for the body, but never thought about the soul ; you have been satisfied with earth, and never wanted heaven. You love your children, but can tell them nothing of "the chief good." You would wear your strength to a shadow to keep them from starvation, but would let them hunger for "the bread of life." You flash with indignation at the thought of any wrong done to them, but yet would leave them to go their way into the midst of the temptations of the world—perhaps to stumble and to fall—without the safeguards of piety, or the knowledge of Him who with every temptation can make a way of escape. Perhaps you unbend when the day's work is over, and join in your children's play, while the firelight flickers on the wall ; you would drive dull care away with cheerful songs ; but the Light that is

brighter than the sun, and fairer than the day, and that gladdens every human heart on which it falls, you shut out from your home with bars of pride and prejudice. O fathers and mothers ! God's mercy is more tender than your love, other hands may be stretched out to help those whom your example might betray ; but for your children's sake, for your own sake, do not run this risk any longer. "Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?" And how can you feed your children's souls with husks of wisdom gathered from an unregenerate life?

Another point on which we would lay great stress, is the need of *unity in the home*. A common, cordial feeling between all the members of a household lightens the daily work, and makes the whole life easier and more free. When the father and mother are not at one, the general happiness is in peril. When they have different purposes, or are separated by lack of sympathy, or fall into selfish habits, the good government of the family must suffer. Bickerings and disputes chill young hearts. What is still worse, we sometimes find the children pushed off, as it were, into conflicting currents, to swim or drown as chance may have it. How different the ideal home of the poet :

> "Two birds within one nest,
> Two hearts within one breast,
> Two souls within one fair
> Firm league of love and prayer,
> Together bound for aye and blest.
> An ear that waits to catch
> A hand upon the latch ;
> A step that hastens its sweet rest to win ;
> A world of cares without,
> A world of strife shut out,
> A world of love shut in."

"Ah, but," you say, "those must have been early

days; that kind of thing does not last beyond the honeymoon." Why so? Is not this unity of feeling, this double pulse of sympathetic happiness, the peculiar charm of married life? We grant there is a glow of sunshine upon the picture which cannot always last, —that the peace it reflects must some day be broken. There are vexations and cares and troubles that will force their way even through barred doors; but why should love in such case follow the proverb, and fly out of the window? "For richer, for poorer; for better, for worse,"—that is the true affection; and as time brings cares, the more need is there of this self-forgetting sympathy. Cultivate it for your children's sake; they have a right to share it—the father's strength, the mother's tenderness should meet in their training as one influence. Children best develop where there is this blending of manly and feminine sympathies in their education. The union may, indeed, be said to constitute the native air of childhood, —to be the atmosphere natural to its growth, of which you cannot safely deprive it. Yet when we speak of unity, we must leave room for differences of opinion and temperament. It is as absurd to expect husbands and wives always to think alike or feel alike, as it would be that they should undertake the same duties. There must be mutual respect and mutual concession, even in matters relating to their children. There may be a "concord of sweet sounds" even from diverse instruments.

Again, *observe how much of home success depends upon little things.* Mr. Spurgeon has told of a servant who, when asked what reasons she had for thinking she was converted, answered, "I sweep under the

doormats now, sir." This religion in small things is wanted in the family. You may have a great idea of the power of steam, but you would never have sat in a railway carriage if there had not been somebody who knew how to put a rein upon this power, and make it work within a narrow compass. In like manner you may have fine notions about religion, you may have large views of life, and liberal ideas of education; but these will not help your children unless you can reduce them to practice, by bringing them to bear on the little things which make up so large a part of existence. Their habits and manners will be shaped to a great extent by your management of small common every-day matters. For example, the habits of neatness and order, of regularity and promptness, of cleanliness and temperance,—how early they may be taught, and how entirely does their acquisition depend upon little things. The little courtesies, too, which people are so apt to lay aside at home, how important they really are; even the tone of your voice, whether it be habitually harsh or gentle, may have an influence on the future of your child.

Consider, further, *how important the atmosphere of home is to the growth of your children.* There is a certain undefined influence in every household which is to the spirit what the air we breathe is to the body. It may be invigorating or depressing; it may infuse life, or it may contain the seeds of death. There is not a mother but knows how children often suffer from the want of fresh air. Poor little things! their souls sometimes suffer, too, because of the impure atmosphere in which they live. Throw open your homes; let in the glad light and love of God. Look to it that

your children grow up under wholesome influences. The healthy growth of character depends much more upon the general tone and spirit of the home than upon any precepts. There is no teaching, moral or religious, half so efficacious as the silent habitual teaching of the daily life. What you do will always have more influence than what you say. A cheerful face charms away bad tempers. Plain-spoken, honest, truthful ways will make children truthful, as deceit will make them false. Patience inspires patience. A large abounding life stimulates life. A loving heart quickens love. Industry encourages industry. You set your plants in the sunshine when you want them to unfold their tender buds. Do the same with your children. A wisely governed home should exert an influence as noiseless and as genial.

So far we have spoken chiefly of what lies within the range of your own character as parents, but in dealing with your children you soon discover that they have wills independent of yours, and differences of capacity and temper which cannot be moulded just as you like. *Train your children with sympathy.* Enter into their thoughts—watch their changing moods and wants—try to understand them. Many excellent, and even kind-hearted, people, fail in this respect. They will treat a babe, for example, as so much plastic dough, and many a temper has been spoiled by their handling. Take the case of a tiny child, just beginning to assert its right to be—and one of the most charming and most wonderful things in God's creation, if you will only study it. This little creature is not to be the mere slave of your will; you are bound to respect its helplessness and innocence. Yet you

will find that some people—not always mothers—have no better idea of training a toddling child than by compelling instant submission to their requirements. It is to cease crying (which, by the way, it will not do) at their word, as if it never could have any pain or trouble to justify its tears. It must be willing to be caught up and carried off at any moment, whatever it is doing or desiring. It must have no likes or dislikes and must kiss anybody at any minute at command. It is to sit perfectly still for long periods, and with nothing to engage its attention. Who of us elder people could bear this perpetual crossing? Instead of this discipline of indignities, begin with sympathy. Study these tender little ones from the first. Do not be always thwarting them; do not check every little natural outbreak; teach them what they are able to learn, *and no more;* lead them, guide them, help them; and so make them feel that your love may be trusted. As years go on, enter into their amusements, show your interest in all that interests them; share their little trials and sorrows, for childhood has its griefs sometimes more bitter than we think; take account of their temptations; encourage their strivings; and pray not only for, but with, them. As they learn to look up to you, your *authority* will have a surer foundation. Do not let this sympathy betray you into weakly yielding to your children. You are called to govern them, do not ruin them by indulgence. If you have a garden, you observe the seasons, when to sow;—you mark the nature of the soil and the varying wants of the plant; you know that to prune the trees at random, to lop off a branch here or a branch there in any fashion, or without regard to the time of the year, is to spoil, and perhaps to kill, them; you take note of these things,

and your skill in gardening shows itself accordingly. In like manner in the family, you will observe what is best for your children, you will strive to train them aright, you will not spare correction when it is required. Sympathy will help you to see what is wanted, but experience must supply the want. It is too true that very many children are spoiled by the foolish fondness of parents. On the other hand, boys and girls will break away from home restraints as soon as they can, if sympathy is wanting. It is in the happy blending of sympathy with authority that you will find the secret of good home government.

The wings grow while the fledglings lie warm in their nest, and the day comes when the young birds are seen pluming their feathers and preparing for flight. So it will be with your children; they will presently be leaving your roof; but it has been well said, "Man has many a dwelling place, but only one home." The true heart never forgets its cradle. The influence of home is probably the most lasting of all influences. You must, then, as parents, remember that home is a preparation-place for the great world beyond. *Teach your children to be ready for their opportunities,* always recollecting that the good Providence of God orders our affairs, and that this is the manner of His working. You have heard of George Stephenson, who perfected the locomotive engine, and laid the first railways. His first wages were 2d. a day for herding cows; he never went to school; but he was a handy little lad, and taught himself all sorts of things, so that he soon found plenty to do, and as he grew up, became known among all his companions as a clever man. There was a coal-pit in the neighbour-

hood, where an engine had been at work for a year pumping out the water, and still the water gained. "Well, George," said one, "what do you mak' o' her?" "Man," answered George, "I could alter her, and make her draw, and in a week's time I could send you all to the bottom of the pit." His words were reported to the head man; he was given a trial, and allowed to choose his workmen; and in six days the pit was cleared of water! *The knowledge was ready for the opportunity.* One success led to another, till the reputation of Stephenson was established. Such instances might be multiplied; there are probably few lives, even the most humble, which do not in some way illustrate the same principle. Many "a good chance," as people call it, has been lost because those to whom it came did not know how to take advantage of it. Let your boys and girls learn the value of opportunities, and be prepared for them. Educate them in this spirit, if you would have them useful.

One thing more. *Character* is the best preparation for many of the opportunities of life. Set a high standard before your children; try to awaken a spirit above the meannesses of the world; cultivate generous feelings. Let them learn that noble doing belongs to all classes, and that the commonest acts may be made holy. We have heard too much, indeed, in our generation about being "heroes." Better than all such exhortations are those other words: "He that would be a hero will barely be a man; he that will be simply a doer of his work is sure of his manhood." But cherish the temper which makes heroism possible. There is a fine illustration of the manner in which

this higher spirit may influence an ordinary life in a recent biography. Dr. Norman Macleod says :—

"Tom Baird, the carter, the beadle of my working man's church, was as noble a fellow as ever lived—God-fearing, true, unselfish. I shall never forget what he said when I asked him to stand at the door of the working man's congregation, and when I thought he was unwilling to do so in his working clothes. 'If,' said I, 'you don't like to do it, if you are ashamed—' 'Ashamed!' he exclaimed, as he turned round upon me. 'I'm mair ashamed o' yoursel', sir. Div ye think that I believe, as ye ken I do, that Jesus Christ, who died for me, was stripped o' his raiment on the cross, and that I—Na, na, I'm prood to stand at the door.' Dear, good fellow! There he stood for seven winters, without a sixpence of pay; all from love, though at my request the working congregation gave him a silver watch. When he was dying from small-pox, the same unselfish nature appeared. When asked if they should let me know, he replied, 'There's nae man leevin' I like as I do him. I know he would come. But he shouldna' come on account of his wife and bairns, and so ye munna tell him!' I never saw him in his illness, never hearing of his danger till it was too late."

The unselfish Christian temper shines out in these incidents; and it is such a temper shown in common things that we would have you nurture in your children. The world wants men and women of this character in every rank.

These principles have borne fruit in many a home, and doubtless amongst those whom we address, there are some who have reaped the harvest of happiness

and peace that springs from them. Bear with us if we have fallen into the vein of exhortation. As the years go on, experience will teach us all many things. Nothing can ever so impress us with the sense of human weakness, and the need of Divine help, as the remembrance of our own failures; the soul that feels the burden of evil will first seek the salvation of Jesus Christ; and so it will be, that in proportion to our efforts to do our best for our children, we shall realise that there is a point beyond which we cannot go, and that the wisest instructions are vain without the informing power of the Holy Spirit. There will be some discouragements in every household, and much to vex the spirit and to try the faith. But let none despond. "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not."

You may have heard it said of some good man in time-hallowed phrase, that "he was the child of many prayers." O privilege beyond all estimation! Such prayers follow a child all his days; they are more than an angel hand to him; they bring him into the very presence of God. Make prayer your daily solace; cast your care upon Him who careth for you; and plead the name of Christ who said, "Suffer the little children to come unto ME, for of such is the kingdom of heaven."

We appeal to you, fathers and mothers, are not these things worth thinking about? Would you have the year to come better and happier than the last? *Then, begin at home.* Begin by practising what you believe, by putting to use the knowledge you have. Begin with a determination to make some real progress. Begin in the heart, which is the core of the home.

Begin with your own lives. Begin with little things. Begin by throwing open the windows of the soul, and letting in the pure air of heaven. Turn to your little ones with quickened sympathies; fit them for the opportunities God may provide; give them the right impulses. Yes, *begin at home* in this spirit, begin with prayer and in faith; and your home, though humble, shall become a centre of light, and your influence go forth to bless your children's children.

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