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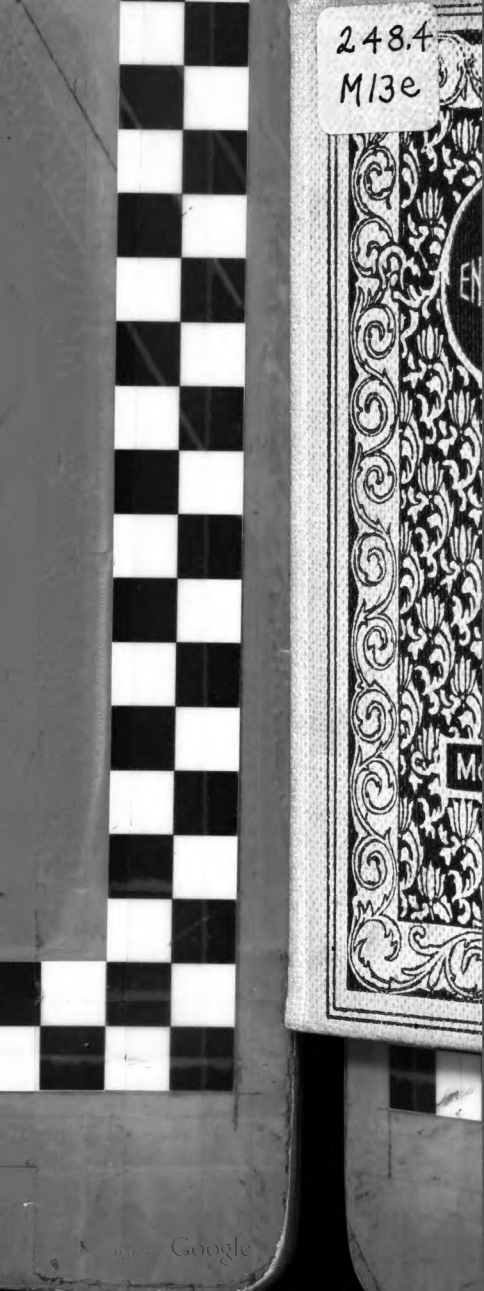


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Environment

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“BROOK trout take their color from the waters in which they lie.” So the saying runs. I never understood its meaning until a day in my boyhood when I was trout fishing among the hills of New England. Then I noticed that the trout caught among the rocks and trees, where the shadows were deep, were dark colored, while the trout caught out in the meadows, where the sunshine was strong, were light colored.

Sooner or later everybody learns that surroundings, or as we usually say, “circumstances,” have an influence. “It is harder to be a Christian,” Dr. Lyman Beecher used to

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ENVIRONMENT

say, "when the east wind is blowing than at other times." People are affected by weather; a clear sky and a tonic air are exhilarating, a cloudy sky and a heavy air are depressing. Companionship too has its effect; gay associates make us merry and funereal associates make us sad. Place also has its influence; it has been asserted that "if Shakespeare had been born in Egypt in the sixteenth century and been surrounded by the ignorance of Egyptian civilization, we should never have had Macbeth; or if Raphael had been born in America in that same century he never could have painted The Transfiguration."

So it has come about that we are often called "creatures of circumstances," as though our surroundings decided what manner of persons we must be. In the line of this idea there is a word that has come to be

ENVIRONMENT

quite current: the word "environment." The Century Dictionary says that its meaning is "the sum of the influences and agencies which affect an organism from without." This is a wise and comprehensive definition; comprehensive because it includes every kind of organism, animals and birds as well as vegetables and insects. But if the word is to be used only in its application to *mankind*, a somewhat altered definition is more accurate: namely, that environment is "the sum of the influences and agencies which *tend* to affect an organism from without." The insertion of this new idea, "tend," in the definition makes environment a very different force when applied to people than when applied to other organisms.

It is well known that some schools of thought unhesitatingly assert that we are made by our circumstances:

ENVIRONMENT

that the place in which we live, the generation in which we are born, the home in which we grow up, the climate, the natural resources, the ideas that are around us, decide what our general character is to be. In some great centers of learning the professors who occupy chairs of philosophy teach this; and in other centers of learning those who instruct in history do the same. There are volumes written upon the basis of this idea, and in them the effort is made thus to explain the deeds of men and the courses of nations. Herbert Spencer and Henry T. Buckle have much to say in defense of this theory of human life.

There are three features of the situation, however, that seem to me to escape the attention of those who thus make environment so dominating. One is, acquaintance with

ENVIRONMENT

all the facts. There are parts of the earth not far removed from one another having exactly the same type of climate, soil and surroundings in which types of men live that are very different from one another. "That Sardinia, with all her emotional and picturesque barbarism, has never produced a single artist is almost as strange as her barbarism itself. Yet Sicily's past history has been brilliant in the extreme and her commerce is great." Sometimes a certain kind of situation produces one stamp of people and sometimes that same kind of situation produces another stamp of people. Then, too, that most significant feature of a human being, the power of his will, is underestimated when it is claimed that we are compelled to be what our environment necessitates. And once again, that great fact is omitted from such teaching, the fact that there is

ENVIRONMENT

a supernatural agency called the Holy Spirit, who may have a tremendous part in directing and strengthening the human will.

Certainly one character in history cannot be explained by environment, Jesus Christ. He was not "the child of his period." Whatever the test by which he is tried, power, religion, learning, simplicity, no one of them makes him like his age. If it is power, Herod was the typical man of his day, luxurious, cruel, impure; while Christ was abstemious, gentle, white, having power but using it wholly for helpfulness. If it is religion, the Pharisee was the creation of his day, a formalist insisting on outward details without thought of the heart within; while Christ made the inner spirit supreme and dwelt as far apart from the Pharisaism of his age as east is from west. If it is learning, those Rabbins who

ENVIRONMENT

pondered whether it was right to eat the egg laid on the day after the Sabbath, because the hen had been preparing the egg on the Sabbath, stood for the smallness and unworthiness of erudition; while Christ dealt with principles of wisdom that involved universal righteousness and heavenly perfection. The disciples in their simplicity were just what we might expect of Galileans; but Christ, a Galilean, had none of their narrowness, none of their blindness. Christ was unlike any one in all his land; his mother did not and could not shape him, nor could Nazareth, nor could Judea. Away from Christ's own land, in the great world at large, Nero was "a child of the period," knowing many things, having place and using all his power, for self; while Christ, who understood the world at large, having knowledge and able to claim place and power,

ENVIRONMENT

laid every element of his being at the feet of human need.

The loneliest man in all the generations of mankind was Jesus Christ, simply because he was so unique. No home, no race, no situation could claim to have made him. He is not one in a series of mountain peaks; he rises from an absolutely smooth plain. There is no one to whom we may compare him. He thought his own thoughts in his own way; he shaped circumstances; he was a creator of situations, not their creature. He *would* not give way to temptation; he meant to be and he was, unconquerable. He belonged to all periods, and not to one; to all races, and not to one; to all ages, and not to one; to all climates, and not to one. Magnificently is this uniqueness of the character of Jesus Christ set forth in Young's "Christ of History," in Bushnell's

ENVIRONMENT

“Nature and the Supernatural,” and in Boardman’s “The Problem of Jesus.” Yes, Jesus Christ was never made by his environment; he would be the same to-day, here, in Europe, in Africa, anywhere, in every essential element of his being, that he was nineteen hundred years ago in Palestine.

And this too is true; there are many, many characters that cannot be explained by their environment. Their uniqueness in their time and place is not so perfect as that of the Christ, but it is still very positive. Abraham was affected by his age to the degree that he felt justified in deceit, but apart from this deceit he had ideals and he lived ideals that exalted him far above his surroundings. Joseph was no slave of environment when he breathed the soul-destructive atmosphere of an eastern harem, but he was master

ENVIRONMENT

of environment. It must have been a most trying experience for the parents of Daniel to see their son transferred to all the debilitating and ruining influences of the court at Babylon! Would the boy be carried captive by them as the current sweeps forward the chip? Daniel had no intention of lowering his standards of integrity; "he purposed in his heart he would not defile himself with the king's meat"—and years upon years of deleterious surroundings left him unchanged, the same strong character he was in boyhood.

Biblical characters are not alone in their superiority to environment. Such books as Sienkiewicz's "Quo Vadis" and Farrar's "Darkness and Dawn" show that men and women in the first years of Christianity lived in Nero's palace itself, where evil was in every inch of air and pene-

ENVIRONMENT

trated to every room, corner and recess of that vast pile, and they preserved their Christianity as spotless as the driven snow. They were slaves in name; they were masters in fact. They scarcely dared make sign of the faith that was within them; and still they cherished that faith, they nourished it and they lived by it. It was inevitable that the sweetness and purity of their life would be recognized; the contrast between them and their surroundings was too great to escape observation. Then came the days when the evil eye fell on them, and later the evil hand, and they were dragged forth to the seats of the persecutors. But persecution could not overpower them any more than vice and luxury had done. Out in the open, youth and age stood, girls as well as men and boys, and though the persecutors heated seven times more hot the fires

ENVIRONMENT

of anger and plied them with cruelty, suffering and agony, they could not make an environment that should conquer these martyrs. Crosses, lions, tortures, were impotent; there was that within these men and women that was unreach-able by environment.

It has always been the same in every age, in every place; some people have been more than and different from their situation. The missionary has aimed to be a conqueror of circumstance, not a subject of it. The tradition of St. George of England is that he sought out the dragon of destruction and slew him, not allowing himself to be slain by him. St. David of Wales, St. Andrew of Scotland, St. Patrick of Ireland stand for men who penetrated the abodes of wrong and patiently, persistently, surely became victors over wrong. There is not a nation of Europe that

ENVIRONMENT

is without its heroes, heroes who, in the earlier ages when ignorance and vice were predominating, entered the nation and started influences that overcame the ignorance and vice. And to-day, missionary annals are crowded with the stories of men and women in the worst parts of London, New York and Berlin, and in the lowest, most degraded parts of the New Hebrides and India, who are beautiful in their purity and commanding in their righteousness, a marked contrast to their environment.

There is scarcely any theory more pernicious than that environment may and must determine action. Out of it springs the idea that we are to do in our time and place what others are doing; "In Rome do as Romans do." Every one gets caught by this theory if he is not on his guard. It is startling how many

ENVIRONMENT

people are ready to take their color, chameleon-like, from their surroundings. Because in some matters we are affected by our environment, and wisely so, surely we are not to be affected in all matters by our environment. Let us dress quite largely according to the fashion of our day (so long as the fashion ministers to health and comfort), and thus protect ourselves from undue notice. Let us bundle ourselves up in cold weather and throw off wraps in warm weather, yielding to environment. Let us do many things as they are done in our surroundings, in style of carriage, home and books. But just so soon as in these things, or in any other, a moral principle is involved and there is a question of rectitude, just so soon the thought of environment is to be given to the winds and we are to assert *ourselves*.

ENVIRONMENT

Because there are so many who, not stopping to consider the moral principle involved in a situation, yield unquestionably to it, the customs of a locality, the traditions of a school, the habits of a social set are most important; people move with them, without a thought. "It's the way it is done here," the person says, and so he does as others do. Where school traditions are wrong, the newcomer drifts with them without realizing their danger, and where social practices are vicious, the ambitious fall in with them without pondering their outcome.

The reasons are clear as light why environment ensnares so many. One is, that it is easy to do as others do; it is in the line of least resistance; it is simply yielding to circumstance. Like a vine that runs wherever its support is, east or west, north or south as the case may be,

ENVIRONMENT

without a will of its own, so it is easy to go with the crowd. Another reason is, that people are afraid of criticism. Often it makes a man a marked man to be different from his surroundings. Let a person of a sensitive nature be the only one of two hundred guests at a table, who does not have the wine bottle at his plate, and he feels deeply his loneliness. And still another reason is, that people have no proper valuation of their own individuality. They let others decide their behavior and determine their influence and fix their destiny, as though every individual was not a sovereign, who should allow no one to lord it over him but himself!

The result of such yielding to environment is most deleterious. It takes away the sense of one's power to be what he ought to be; it robs him of hope; he becomes a mere

ENVIRONMENT

leaf upon the wind of his day. And besides, it lowers his sense of his personal responsibility. "Why *should* he exert himself?" he argues. "A man cannot rise higher than his times, nor be a shaper of events!" And so he accepts the ideals of his surroundings, gives himself to the tendencies about him, and never summons himself to an heroic purpose and an unflagging effort at masterhood of environment.

There is indeed a value, and a great value, to be placed upon environment. It does matter where children are brought up, the sights they see, the sounds they hear. It is pitiable beyond words to express, that children from their infancy may go in and out of saloons, hearing oaths, seeing drunkenness and catching the odor of vile talk. Overcrowded tenements are breeding places of vice. Inspector Byrnes

ENVIRONMENT

declares that nine out of every ten persons staying in the wretched, cheap boarding houses of New York, come out of them ready for criminal wrong-doing. Every effort to make environment better is to be commended and supported. The man who would arrest the street blasphemer and guard the ears of the community from oaths, is a public benefactor. When D. O. Mills builds his hotel in which single men may have board, room and conveniences at cheap rates, apart from a bar or any injurious surrounding, he does society a benefit. All who labor to improve the homes and schools and streets of cities, so that cooking shall be wholesome and pictures shall represent noble thought and people shall be protected from insult, are humanity's friends. When Christ was here he would have the man fallen among thieves taken to an

ENVIRONMENT

inn, where there was a far better chance for his recovery than out on the Jericho road; and were he here now, he would undoubtedly be in sympathy with every movement to drain marshes, secure good air, make workshops healthy and place the clear and beautiful where there is the soiled and ugly. The opportunity of improving the environment of people is great and is stimulating; every one should have part in it, for himself and for others. The composer Gounod chose a seat in some church or cathedral when he wrote sacred music. He wrote the "Redemption" in a corner of Notre Dame Cathedral, and "Jeanne d'Arc" in the Cathedral at Rheims where the whole place was filled with the memory of the maid's presence.

But environment is not the all of life, nor is it the main element of

ENVIRONMENT

life. If I have a broken arm, the first thing to do is to have the bone set, and then to think of the splints. Splints are of small value to the arm until the bone is set. It is the inner spirit that is the essential element; environment is secondary. When Christ was in Jerusalem, the city had its low theaters, its debasing luxuries, its debauching drinking customs, its habits of impurity. Poverty and dirt and squalor were about him. So they also were in Rome, in Corinth, in Alexandria. It is better to have read the disgusting portion of "Quo Vadis," at its beginning, wherein the vice of Rome is described, simply to know what the life of the day was, the environment of the men and women whom Christ sent into the world, than not to have read it. Let any one go over the scene in Wallace's "Ben Hur," that sets forth what occurred in the feasts

ENVIRONMENT

of heathen worship at Antioch, and he will realize that contamination and lowness were well-nigh overpowering.

But Christ actually sent forth his disciples, "thrust them forth," if you please, into this environment. Not, however, until he had put a new spirit within them, did he do this. He mended the bone—and then he told them to go; to go with a purpose to change environment, yes, to conquer environment, to turn the world upside down if need be, but in any case to master the moral situation. They were to cut down thorns and not let them sting them; to resist the devil and make him flee; to tread on scorpions and keep them from biting them; to cure the world's wrongs and take away their power to hurt. Every man of all whom he sent out was to *overcome* evil, with *good*; was to wage an

ENVIRONMENT

unceasing and unending warfare with evil. Christ had a valuation of circumstance—but he had a greater valuation of inner purpose. Herein was his hope; they were not to do in Rome as Romans did, nor in Corinth as Corinthians did, nor anywhere else were they to take their opinions and their conduct from their environment. They were to be conquerors of circumstance, overthrowing bad customs, slavery, impurity and everything else that was wrong. Such singular and forceful action might make them marked men and expose them to criticism, but marked men or unmarked men they *must* conquer.

So it is that Christ put his emphasis on that within a man that speaks the nature of his spirit, the man's *will*. He summoned the will to action. He did give bread to the body, but in so doing he called atten-

ENVIRONMENT

tion to his ideas of life, his methods of life, and then telling a man's heart that those ideas and methods should be the heart's bread, he asked the heart to *will* to do the things he had taught. It was not environment, but the man in the environment, that was supreme with Christ. He expected people to come straight out of their environment, whatever it was, and be large-souled; fishermen to be magnanimous, publicans to be liberal, women of the streets to be pure. And he succeeded!

Let it not be thought that there was recklessness in this manner of procedure. He who thus expected integrity and virtue, understood the force of environment. He charged men to watch and pray, and he let them know that safety could be secured only through precaution. For environment is a very serious matter; it is folly to disregard it.

ENVIRONMENT

Lot, when he pitched his tent near Sodom and unnecessarily let his children grow up surrounded by Sodom's vices, was a careless and an unkind parent. To send a child away to school where evil is in the air, is a most hurtful mistake. To put a boy in a business where trickery prevails, may ruin him forever. It is amazing how people change their place of residence without considering the spiritual significance of environment. The book "Quabbin" describes farm life, and incidentally tells the effect produced upon the children of a home by the hurtful talk of "the hired man" who had the freedom of the kitchen fire on winter evenings. It is unwise, very unwise, for a family to take a summer outing in a locality where religious worship of some kind is not held stately, or to go to a hotel where Sunday is not carefully noted, or to send children to visit

ENVIRONMENT

in homes whose influence may be spiritually harmful.

How much environment means to all is suggested by what it means to some. After Gough had been picked out of the gutter and saved from his drunkenness, he could not pass a saloon door and have the smell of liquor reach him, without craving to drink again—and to drink was to fall. He had to keep splints on his broken arm for a long, long time after the bone was set and had grown together, else that bone would have broken again. The Indian boy who has been educated at Carlisle or at Hampton, cannot go back to the homes of his tribe and sustain his new cleanliness, industry and purity, unless he guards himself by night and day from deterioration. Charles Lamb used to say that he believed so thoroughly in the theory of antipodes, that he easily credited the story of

ENVIRONMENT

the two men who, traveling in opposite directions around the earth, met, and without exchanging a word, fell to blows. There are scenes and situations, and people too, that we cannot deal with aright, excepting through the most careful and prayerful caution. Luxuries ruined the army of Hannibal at Capua simply because the army forgot the power of luxurious environment. Sirens' voices wrecked many a ship off the coasts of Sicily for this reason only, that the sailors did not protect themselves, as they could have done, against their environment. It is folly, absolute folly, for any one to place himself in danger unless he has a justifying motive for so doing; and the only justifying motive is, the defense and advance of some good cause. To put oneself where evil is, simply to see it or hear it; to visit low places from curiosity, or to take

ENVIRONMENT

fire in one's hand and heart to find whether it will burn; to expose oneself, excepting as a helper of Christ, to anything, anywhere, that debases, is folly, folly only, and sinful folly at that. It is not wise to join any organization, club, society, whatever it may be; to align oneself with any business; to give oneself to any coterie, until environment has been studied and we know whether environment is to pull us down or to build us up.

For it must be remembered that this life of ours is in many respects to be a *fight* with environment. We are in this world, but we are not to be of this world. There is no Eden of our happiness so fair but that a serpent may enter it and whisper words that make forbidden fruit attractive. Everybody is as Daniel was in Babylon; in the midst of an environment that tends to weaken

ENVIRONMENT

the highest ideals of youth, to dissipate the best teachings of godly parents. Daniel's danger was not in his doing any egregious wrong—but in relaxing his convictions, blunting his conscientiousness and drawing apart from God. There is no use in any man, whether he be in a garden, a court, a market place or a workshop, expecting to make his life a success over circumstances, unless he buckles on armor and *fights to conquer*.

Much, very much of that success will depend upon the use he makes of his *will*. Let that will be as resolute for good as was the will of Shadrach when he *would* not give way to evil though a burning, fiery furnace awaited him, and environment will be mastered. The power of one's will can be developed; the will can be made stronger, firmer, wiser. Two persons may be situated exactly alike, in the same house, the

ENVIRONMENT

same society, the same temptations, and the one who holds his will resolute for good will stand and triumph, while the one who lets his will wobble will yield and go down. Circumstances do not make men. "Only the lower natures," said Henry Ward Beecher, "are formed by external circumstances. Great natures are fully developed by forces from within." Neither does a good environment necessarily make a man good, nor a bad environment necessarily make him bad. We may be wicked in the midst of culture, refinement, art and love; we may be noble in the midst of ignorance, squalor and hatred. A man's goodness is his own decision. He who stands in his own environment to conquer it, is quite sure to sustain his integrity. All this means, that environment demands study. Given a long head and a stout heart and

ENVIRONMENT

a resolute will, and the battle is won.

Best of all, and highest of all, there is one element that is invincible and renders us invincible in environment, the Holy Spirit. There *is* a power that can enter the heart and purify it; that can lay hold of the will and strengthen it, so that no situation, howsoever grim and threatening it may be, can prevail over us. "I can do all things," Paul said in view of danger, distress and temptation, "through Christ who helpeth me;" and so he could. Let a man be where God wants him, and then let him avail himself of the help God will give him in his soul, and he cannot be overthrown. He who lives near Christ, who sees things in Christ's light, who catches Christ's spirit and does things in Christ's way, is sure, like Christ himself, to be conqueror of environment.

ENVIRONMENT

Yes, there is hope for any and for every man in his particular situation. Dr. Bradford in his "Heredity" tells two instructive stories. One is of a colored woman in whose veins flowed the blood of an ancestry that, as far back as she could trace, had been low. Her surroundings were corrupt and corrupting. She realized the nature of her past and of her present. Thereupon she resolved that the low and the corrupt should cease with her life—and they did cease, and she became sweet, brave and blessed. The other story is of a wife, who, reaching years of maturity when the impressionable period of life is past, and recognizing the fact that she was unhappily married, resolved to change the atmosphere of her home, even if she could not love her husband with all her heart; and she did change it, giving herself to the conquest of an environ-

ENVIRONMENT

ment than which there is scarcely any more difficult to correct, and she made that atmosphere a joy and a solace. These stories suggest others known to every one acquainted with human life; of the boy whose parents pressed drink upon him, but he would not touch it, and to-day he is like the pond lily, a white flower of sobriety sprung from a miry soil of intemperance; of the young man, who, finding himself in companionship that was ruining him, asserted his purpose to break away and start upon a course of right, and succeeded.

There is no need of being conquered by environment. Man is more than other organisms; beast and bird, flower and fish have not that masterly element of *will* that makes man not only the master of these organisms, but the master of environment also. When a band of

ENVIRONMENT

hundreds of Federal soldiers were brought to Andersonville prison, many of them said, "We shall have to die, we cannot endure these hardships longer." They had passed from prison to prison until they were weary and worn, and when they saw Andersonville's cruel quarters, they gave up hope; they were ready to yield to their environment. But there was one man among them who said within himself: "By God's help I will not die; I will take the best care of myself and live, if I possibly can." The others died, died by tens and twenties, succumbing to environment. But the man who under God *would* live if he possibly could live, did live—and lives to-day.

There is force, great, significant force for physical things in a resolute will backed by dependence upon God. It often changes darkness into light and danger into safety; it

ENVIRONMENT

makes the sick well and the weak strong. But that force may fail, may fail because it is best that it should fail. The Andersonville prisoner may resolve that he will live, and do his best under God to live—and still he may die. But when it comes to matters of the moral nature, it is never, never best that a man's will for the good should fail; and it never does fail so long as that will is strong in the strength of God. Environment is man's opportunity to prove his valor and win a conqueror's crown.

“Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?” Nebuchadnezzar asked. His counsellors answered, “True, O King.” Then he said, “Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.” Then the counsellors looked, and

ENVIRONMENT

it was true; in the worst possible environment these men had been faithful to God and God had been faithful to them. "Upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was a hair of their heads singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed upon them."

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