

CHAPTER 4

GENTLE PUNISHMENT OF DISOBEDIENCE

CHILDREN HAVE NO NATURAL INSTINCT of obedience to their parents, though they have other instincts by means of which the habit of obedience, as an acquisition, can easily be formed.

The true state of the case is well illustrated by what we observe among the lower animals. The hen can call her chickens when she has food for them, or when any danger threatens, and they come to her. They come, however, simply under the impulse of a desire for food or fear of danger, not from any instinctive desire to conform their action to their mother's will; or, in other words, with no idea of submission to parental authority. It is so, substantially, with many other animals whose habits in respect to the relation between parents and offspring come under human observation. The colt and the calf follow and keep near the mother, not from any instinct of desire to conform their conduct to her will, but solely from love of food, or fear of danger. These last are strictly instinctive. They act spontaneously, and require no training of any sort to establish or to maintain them.

The case is substantially the same with children. They run to their mother by instinct, when want, fear, or pain impels them. They require no teaching or training for this. But for them to come simply because their mother wishes them to come—to be controlled, in other words, by her will, instead of by their own impulses, is a different thing altogether. They have no instinct for that. They have only *a capacity for its development*.

Instincts and Capacities

It may, perhaps, be maintained that there is no real difference between instincts and capacities, and it certainly is possible that they may pass into each other by insensible gradations. Still, practically, and in reference to our treatment of any intelligent nature which is in course of gradual development under our influence, the

difference is wide. The dog has an instinct impelling him to attach himself to and follow his master; but he has no instinct leading him to draw his master's cart. He requires no teaching for the one. It comes, of course, from the connate impulses of his nature. For the other he requires a skillful and careful training. If we find a dog who evinces no disposition to seek the society of man, but roams off into woods and solitudes alone, he is useless, and we attribute the fault to his own wolfish nature. But if he will not fetch and carry at command, or bring home a basket in his mouth from market, the fault, if there is any fault, is in his master, in not having taken the proper time and pains to train him, or in not knowing how to do it. He has an instinct leading him to attach himself to a human master, and to follow his master wherever he goes. But he has no instinct leading him to fetch and carry, or to draw carts for anybody. If he shows no affection for man, it is his own fault—that is, the fault of his nature. But if he does not fetch and carry well, or go out of the room when he is ordered out, or draw steadily in a cart, it is his teacher's fault. He has not been properly trained.

Who is Responsible?

So with the child. If he does not seem to know how to take his food, or shows no disposition to run to his mother when he is hurt or when he is frightened, we have reason to suspect something wrong, or, at least, something abnormal, in his mental or physical constitution. But if he does not obey his mother's commands—no matter how insubordinate or unmanageable he may be—the fault does not, certainly, indicate anything at all wrong in him. The fault is in his training. In witnessing his disobedience, our reflection should be, not "What a bad boy!" but "What an unfaithful or incompetent mother!"

I have dwelt the longer on this point because it is fundamental. As long as a mother imagines, as so many mothers seem to do, that obedience on the part of the child is, or ought to be, a matter of course, she will never properly undertake the work of training him. But when she thoroughly understands and feels that her children are not to be expected to submit their will to hers, *except so far as she forms in them the habit of doing this by special training*, the battle is half won.

Actual Instincts of Children

The natural instinct which impels her children to come at once to her for refuge and protection in all their troubles and fears, is a great source of happiness to every mother. This instinct shows itself in a thousand ways. "A mother, one morning"—I quote the anecdote from a newspaper (The "Boston Congregationalist") which came to hand while I was writing this chapter—"gave her two little ones books and toys to amuse them, while she went to attend to some work in an upper room. Half an hour passed quietly, and then a timid voice at the foot of the stairs called out:

"Mamma, are you there?"

"Yes, darling."

"All right then!" and the child went back to its play.

"Shortly, the little voice was heard again, repeating,

"Mamma, are you there?"

"Yes"

"All right then," and the little ones returned again, satisfied and reassured, to their toys."

The sense of their mother's presence, or at least the certainty of her being near at hand, was necessary to their security and contentment in their playing. But this feeling was not the result of any teachings that they had received from their mother, or upon her having inculcated upon their minds in any way the necessity of their keeping always within reach of maternal protection; nor had it been acquired by their own observation or experience of dangers or difficulties which had befallen them when too far away. It was a native instinct of the soul—the same that leads the lamb and the calf to keep close to their mother's side, and causes the unweaned babe to cling to its mother's bosom, and to shrink from being put away into the crib or cradle alone.

The Responsibility Rests Upon the Mother

The mother is thus to understand that the principle of obedience is not to be expected to come by nature into the heart of her child, but to be implanted by education. She must understand this so fully as to feel that if she finds that her children are disobedient to her commands—leaving out of view cases of peculiar and extraordinary temptation—it is *her* fault, not theirs. Perhaps I ought

not to say her *fault* exactly, for she may have done as well as she knows how; but, at any rate, it is a failure. Instead of being angry with them, or fretting and complaining about the trouble they give her, she should leave them, as it were, out of the case, and turn her thoughts to herself, and to her own management, with a view to the discovery and the correcting of her own derelictions and errors. In a word, she must set regularly and systematically about the work of *teaching* her children to subject their will to hers.

Three Methods

I shall give three principles of management, or rather three different classes of measures, by means of which children may certainly be made obedient. The most perfect success will be attained by employing them all. But they require very different degrees of skill and tact on the part of the mother. The first requires very little skill. It demands only steadiness, calmness, and perseverance. The second draws much more upon the mother's mental resources, and the last, most of all. Indeed, as will presently be seen, there is no limit to the amount of tact and ingenuity, not to say genius, which may be advantageously exercised in the last method. The first is the most essential; and it will alone, if faithfully carried out, accomplish the end. The second, if the mother has the tact and skill to carry it into effect, will aid very much in accomplishing the result, and in a manner altogether more agreeable to both parties. The third will make the work of forming the habit of obedience on the part of the mother, and of acquiring it on the part of the child, a source of the highest enjoyment to both. But then, unfortunately, it requires more skill and dexterity, more gentleness of touch, so to speak, and a more delicate constitution of soul, than most mothers can be expected to possess.

But let us see what the three methods are.

First Method

The first principle is that the mother should so regulate her management of her child, that he should *never* gain any desired end by any act of insubmission, but *always* incur some small trouble, inconvenience, or privation, by disobeying or neglecting to obey his mother's command. The important words in this

statement of the principle are *never* and *always*. It is the absolute certainty that disobedience will hurt him, and not help him, in which the whole efficacy of the rule consists.

It is very surprising how small a punishment will prove efficacious if it is *only certain* to follow the transgression. You may set apart a certain place for a prison—a corner of the sofa, a certain ottoman, a chair, a stool, anything will answer; and the more entirely everything like an air of displeasure or severity is excluded, in the manner of making the preliminary arrangements, the better. A mother without any tact, or any proper understanding of the way in which the hearts and minds of young children are influenced, will begin, very likely, with a scolding.

“Children, you are getting very disobedient. I have to speak three or four times before you move to do what I say. Now, I am going to have a prison. The prison is to be that dark closet, and I am going to shut you up in it for half an hour every time you disobey. Now, remember! The very next time!”

Empty Threatening

Mothers who govern by threatening seldom do anything but threaten. Accordingly, the first time the children disobey her, after such an announcement, she says nothing, if the case happens to be one in which the disobedience occasions her no particular trouble. The next time, when the transgression is a little more serious, she thinks, very rightly perhaps, that to be shut up half an hour in a dark closet would be a disproportionate punishment. Then, when at length some very willful and grave act of insubordination occurs, she happens to be in particularly good-humor, for some reason, and has not the heart to shut “the poor thing” in the closet; or, perhaps, there is company present, and she does not wish to make a scene. So the penalty announced with so much emphasis turns out to be a dead letter, as the children knew it would from the beginning.

How Discipline may be both Gentle and Efficient

With a little dexterity and tact on the mother’s part, the case may be managed very differently, and with a very different result. Let us suppose that some day, while she is engaged with her sewing

or her other household duties, and her children are playing around her, she tells them that in some great schools in Europe, when the boys are disobedient, or violate the rules, they are shut up for punishment in a kind of prison; and perhaps she entertains them with invented examples of boys that would not go to prison, and had to be taken there by force, and kept there longer on account of their contumacy; and also of other noble boys, tall and handsome, and the best players on the grounds, who went readily when they had done wrong and were ordered into confinement, and bore their punishment like men, and who were accordingly set free all the sooner on that account. Then she proposes to them the idea of adopting that plan herself, and asks them to look all about the room and find a good seat which they can have for their prison—one end of the sofa, perhaps, a stool in a corner, or a box used as a house for a kitten. I once knew an instance where a step before a door leading to a staircase served as penitentiary, and sitting upon it for a minute or less was the severest punishment required to maintain most perfect discipline in a family of young children for a long time.

When any one of the children violated any rule or direction which had been enjoined upon them—as, for example, when they left the door open in coming in or going out, in the winter; or interrupted their mother when she was reading, instead of standing quietly by her side and waiting until she looked up from her book and gave them leave to speak to her; or used any violence towards each other, by pushing, or pulling, or struggling for a plaything or a place; or did not come promptly to her when called; or did not obey at once the first command in any case, the mother would say simply, “Mary!” or “James! Prison!” She would pronounce this sentence without any appearance of displeasure, and often with a smile, as if they were only playing prison, and then, in a very few minutes after they had taken the penitential seat, she would say *Free!* which word set them at liberty again.

Must Start at the Beginning

I have no doubt that some mothers, in reading this, will say that such management as this is mere trifling and play; and that real and actual children, with all their natural turbulence, insubordina-

tion, and obstinacy, can never really be governed by any such means. I answer that whether it proves on trial to be merely trifling and play or not depends upon the firmness, steadiness, and decision with which the mother carries it into execution. Every method of management requires firmness, perseverance, and decision on the part of the mother to make it successful, but, with these qualities duly exercised, it is astonishing what slight and gentle penalties will suffice for the most complete establishment of her authority. I knew a mother whose children were trained to habits of almost perfect obedience, and whose only method of punishment, so far as I know, was to require the offender to stand on one foot and count five, ten, or twenty, according to the nature and aggravation of the offense. Such a mother, of course, begins early with her children. She trains them from their earliest year's to this constant subjection of their will to hers. Such penalties, moreover, owe their efficiency not to the degree of pain or inconvenience that they impose upon the offender, but mainly upon their *calling his attention, distinctly*, after every offense, to the fact that he has done wrong. Slight as this is, it will prove to be sufficient if it *always* comes—if no case of disobedience or of willful wrong doing of any kind is allowed to pass unnoticed, or is not followed by the infliction of the proper penalty. It is in all cases the certainty, and not the severity, of punishment which constitutes its power.

Suppose One is Not at the Beginning

What has been said thus far relates obviously to cases where the mother is at the commencement of her work of training. This is the way to *begin*; but you cannot begin unless you are at the beginning. If your children are partly grown, and you find that they are not under your command, the difficulty is much greater. The principles which should govern the management are the same, but they cannot be applied by means so gentle. The prison, it may be, must now be somewhat more real, the terms of imprisonment somewhat longer, and there may be cases of insubordination so decided as to require the offender to be carried to it by force, on account of his refusal to go of his own accord, and perhaps to be held there, or even to be tied. Cases requiring treatment so decisive as this must be very rare with children under ten years of age; and when

they occur, the mother has reason to feel self-condemnation—or at least self-abasement—at finding that she has failed so entirely in the first great moral duty of the mother, which is to train her children to comply with her authority from the beginning.

Children Coming under New Control

Sometimes, however, it happens that children are transferred from one charge to another, so that the one upon whom the duty of government devolves, perhaps only for a time, finds that the child or children put under his or her charge have been trained by previous mismanagement to habits of utter insubordination. I say, trained to such habits, for the practice of allowing children to gain their ends by any particular means is really training them to the use of those means. Thus, multitudes of children are taught to disobey, and trained to habits of insubmission and insubordination, by the means most effectually adapted to that end.

Difficulties

When under these circumstances the children come under a new charge, whether permanently or temporarily, the task of reforming their characters is more delicate and difficult than where one can begin at the beginning; but the principles are the same, and the success is equally certain. The difficulty is somewhat increased by the fact that the person thus provisionally in charge has often no natural authority over the child, and the circumstances may moreover be such as to make it necessary to abstain carefully from any measures that would lead to difficulty or collision, to cries, complaints to the mother, or any of those other forms of commotion or annoyance which ungoverned children know so well how to employ in gaining their ends. The mother may be one of those weak-minded women who can never see anything unreasonable in the crying complaints made by their children against other people. Or she may be sick, and it may be very important to avoid everything that could agitate or disturb her.

George and Edward

This last was the case of George, a young man of seventeen, who came to spend some time at home after an absence of two years

in the city. He found his mother sick, and his little brother, Edward, utterly insubordinate and unmanageable.

“The first thing I have to do,” said George to himself, when he observed how things were, “is to get command of Edward;” and as the first lesson which he gave his little brother illustrates well the principle of gentle but efficient punishment, I will give it here.

Edward was ten years of age. He was very fond of going fishing, but he was not allowed to go alone. His mother, very weak and vacillating about some things, was extremely decided about this. So Edward had learned to submit to this restriction, as he would have done to all others if his mother had been equally decided in respect to all.

The first thing that Edward thought of the next morning after his brother’s return was that George might go fishing with him.

“I don’t know,” replied George, in a hesitating and doubtful tone. “I don’t know whether it will do for me to go fishing with you. I don’t know whether I can depend upon your always obeying me and doing as I say.”

Edward made very positive promises, and so it was decided to go. George took great interest in helping Edward about his fishing-tackle, and did all in his power in other ways to establish friendly relations with him, and at length they set out. They walked a little distance down what was in the winter a wood road, and then came to a place where two paths led into a wood. Either of them led to the river. But there was a brook to cross, and for one of these paths there was a bridge. There was none for the other. George said that they would take the former. Edward, however, paid no regard to this direction, but saying simply “No, I’d rather go this way,” walked off in the other path.

“I was afraid you would not obey me,” said George, and then followed Edward into the forbidden path, without making any further objection. Edward concluded at once that he should find George as easily to be managed as he had found other people.

The Disobedience

When they came in sight of the brook, George saw that there was a narrow log across it, in guise of a bridge. He called out to Edward, who had gone on before him, not to go over the log until

he came. But Edward called back in reply that there was no danger, that he could go across alone, and so went boldly over. George, on arriving at the brook, and finding that the log was firm and strong, followed him over it. "I told you I could go across it," said Edward. "Yes," replied George, "and you were right in that. You did cross it. The log is very steady. I think it makes quite a good bridge."

Edward said he could hop across it on one foot, and George gave him leave to try, while he, George, held his fishing-pole for him. George followed him over the log, and then told him that he was very sorry to say it, but that he found that they could not go fishing that day. Edward wished to know the reason. George said it was a private reason and he could not tell him then, but that he would tell him that evening after he had gone to bed. There was a story about it, too, he said, that he would tell him at the same time.

Edward was curious to know what the reason could be for changing the plan, and also to hear the story. Still he was extremely disappointed in having to lose his fishing, and very much disposed to be angry with George for not going on.

It was, however, difficult to get very angry without knowing George's reason, and George, though he said that the reason was a good one — that it was a serious difficulty in the way of going fishing that day, which had only come to his knowledge since they left home — steadily persisted in declining to explain what the difficulty was until the evening, and began slowly to walk back toward the house.

Edward becomes Sullen

Edward then declared that, at any rate, he would not go home. If he could not go fishing he would stay there in the woods. George readily fell in with this idea. "Here is a nice place for me to sit down on this flat rock under the trees," said he, "and I have got a book in my pocket. You can play about in the woods as long as you please. Perhaps you will see a squirrel; if you do, tell me, and I will come and help you catch him." So saying, he took out his book and sat down under the trees and began to read. Edward, after loitering about sullenly a few minutes, began to walk up the path, and said that he was going home.

George, however, soon succeeded in putting him in good humor

again by talking with him in a friendly manner, and without manifesting any signs of displeasure, and also by playing with him on the way. He took care to keep on friendly terms with him all the afternoon, aiding him in his various undertakings, and contributing to his amusement in every way as much as he could, while he made no complaint, and expressed no dissatisfaction with him in any way whatever.

Final Disposition of the Case

After Edward had gone to bed, and before he went to sleep, George made him a visit at his bedside, and, after a little playful frolic with him, to put him in special good humor, said he would make his explanation.

“The reason why I had to give up the fishing expedition,” he said, “was, I found that I could not depend upon your obeying me.”

Edward, after a pause, said that he did not disobey him; and when George reminded him of his taking the path that he was forbidden to take, and of his crossing the log bridge against orders, he said that that path led to the river by the shortest way, and that he knew that the log was firm and steady, and that he could go over it without falling in. “And so you thought you had good reasons for disobeying me,” rejoined George. “Yes,” said Edward, triumphantly. “That is just it,” said George. “You are willing to obey, except when you think you have good reasons for disobeying, and then you disobey. That’s the way a great many boys do, and that reminds me of the story I was going to tell you. It is about some soldiers.”

George then told Edward a long story about a colonel who sent a captain with a company of men on a secret expedition with specific orders, and the captain disobeyed the orders and crossed a stream with his force, when he had been directed to remain on the other side of it, thinking himself that it would be better to cross, and in consequence of it he and all his force were captured by the enemy, who were lying in ambush near by, as the colonel knew, though the captain did not know it.

George concluded his story with some very forcible remarks, showing, in a manner adapted to Edward’s state of mental development, how essential it was to the character of a good soldier that he should obey implicitly all the commands of his superior, with-

out ever presuming to disregard them on the ground of his seeing good reason for doing so.

He then went on to relate another story of an officer on whom the general could rely for implicit and unhesitating obedience to all his commands, and who was sent on an important expedition with orders, the reasons for which he did not understand, but all of which he promptly obeyed, and thus brought the expedition to a successful conclusion. He made the story interesting to Edward by narrating many details of a character adapted to his comprehension, and at the end drew a moral from it for his instruction.

The Moral

This moral was not, as some readers might perhaps anticipate, and as, indeed, many persons of less tact might have made it, that Edward should himself, as a boy, obey those in authority over him. Instead of this he closed by saying: "And I advise you, if you grow up to be a man and ever become the general of an army, never to trust any captain or colonel with the charge of an important enterprise, unless they are men that know how to obey."

Edward answered very gravely that he was "determined that he wouldn't."

Soon after this George said good-night to him and went away. The next day he told Edward not to be discouraged at his not having yet learned to obey. "There are a great many boys older than you," he said, "who have not learned this lesson; but you will learn in time. I can't go fishing with you, or undertake any other great expeditions, till I find I can trust you entirely to do exactly as I say in cases where I have a right to decide; but you will learn before long, and then we can do a great many things together which we cannot do now."

The Principles Illustrated

Anyone who has any proper understanding of the workings of the juvenile mind will see that George, by managing Edward on these principles, would in a short time acquire complete ascendancy over him, while the boy would very probably remain, in relation to his mother, as disobedient and insubordinate as ever. If the penalty annexed to the transgression is made as much as

possible the necessary and natural consequence of it, and is insisted upon calmly, deliberately, and with inflexible decision, but without irritation, without reproaches, almost without any indications even of displeasure, but is, on the contrary, lightened as much as possible by sympathy and kindness, and by taking the most indulgent views, and admitting the most palliating considerations in respect to the nature of the offense, the result will certainly be the establishment of the authority of the parent or guardian on a firm and permanent basis.

There are a great many cases of this kind, where a child with confirmed habits of insubordination comes under the charge of a person who is not responsible for the formation of these habits. Even the mother herself sometimes finds herself in substantially this position with her own children; as, for example, when after some years of lax and inefficient government she becomes convinced that her management has been wrong, and that it threatens to bring forth bitter fruits unless it is reformed. In these cases, although the work is somewhat more difficult, the principles on which success depends are the same. Slight penalties, firmly, decisively, and invariably enforced—without violence, without scolding, without any manifestation of resentment or anger, and, except in extreme cases, without even expressions of displeasure—constitute a system which, if carried out calmly, but with firmness and decision, will assuredly succeed.

The Real Difficulty

The case would thus seem to be very simple, and success very easy. But this is far from being the case. Nothing is required, it is true, but firmness, steadiness, and decision; but, unfortunately, these are the very requisites which, of all others, it seems most difficult for mothers to command. They cannot govern their children because they cannot govern themselves.

Still, if the mother possess these qualities in any tolerable degree, or is able to acquire them, this method of training her children to the habit of submitting implicitly to her authority, by calmly and good-naturedly, but firmly and invariably, affixing some slight privation or penalty to every act of resistance to her will, is the easiest to practice, and will certainly be successful. It

requires no ingenuity, no skill, no contrivance, no thought—nothing but steady persistence in a simple routine. This was the first of the three modes of action enumerated at the commencement of this discussion. There were two others named, which, though requiring higher qualities in the mother than simple steadiness of purpose, will make the work far more easy and agreeable, where these qualities are possessed.

Some further consideration of the subject of punishment, with special reference to the light in which it is to be regarded in respect to its nature and its true mode of action, will occupy the next chapter.