

SELF-HELP;

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS OF

CHARACTER AND CONDUCT.

By SAMUEL SMILES,

AUTHOR OF 'THE LIFE OF GEORGE STEPHENSON.'

"This above all,—To thine own self be true;
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man."

SHAKESPEARE.

TWENTY-FIFTH THOUSAND.



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JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET.

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INTRODUCTION.

THE origin of this book may be briefly told.

Some fifteen years since, the author was requested to deliver an address before the members of some evening classes, which had been formed in a northern town for mutual improvement, under the following circumstances :—

Two or three young men of the humblest rank resolved to meet in the winter evenings, for the purpose of improving themselves by exchanging knowledge with each other. Their first meetings were held in the room of a cottage in which one of the members lived ; and, as others shortly joined them, the place soon became inconveniently filled. When summer set in, they adjourned to the cottage garden outside ; and the classes were then held in the open air, round a little boarded hut used as a garden house, in which those who officiated as teachers set the sums, and gave forth the lessons of the evening. When the weather was fine, the youths might be seen, until a late hour, hanging round the door of the hut like a cluster of bees ; but sometimes a sudden shower of rain would dash the sums from their slates, and disperse them for the evening unsatisfied.

Winter, with its cold nights, was drawing near, and what were they to do for shelter ? Their numbers had by

this time so increased, that no room of an ordinary cottage could accommodate them. Though they were for the most part young men earning comparatively small weekly wages, they resolved to incur the risk of hiring a room; and, on making inquiry, they found a large dingy apartment to let, which had been used as a temporary Cholera Hospital. No tenant could be found for the place, which was avoided as if a plague still clung to it. But the mutual improvement youths, nothing daunted, hired the cholera room at so much a week, lit it up, placed a few benches and a deal table in it, and began their winter classes. The place soon presented a busy and cheerful appearance in the evenings. The teaching may have been, as no doubt it was, of a very rude and imperfect sort; but it was done with a will. Those who knew a little taught those who knew less—improving themselves while they improved the others; and, at all events, setting before them a good working example. Thus these youths—and there were also grown men amongst them—proceeded to teach themselves and each other, reading and writing, arithmetic and geography; and even mathematics, chemistry, and some of the modern languages.

About a hundred young men had thus come together, when, growing ambitious, they desired to have lectures delivered to them; and then it was that the author became acquainted with their proceedings. A party of them waited on him, for the purpose of inviting him to deliver an introductory address, or, as they expressed it, “to talk to them a bit;” prefacing the request by a modest statement of what they had done and what they were doing. He could not fail to be touched by the admirable self-helping spirit

which they had displayed; and, though entertaining but slight faith in popular lecturing, he felt that a few words of encouragement, honestly and sincerely uttered, might not be without some good effect. And in this spirit he addressed them on more than one occasion, citing examples of what other men had done, as illustrations of what each might, in a greater or less degree, do for himself; and pointing out that their happiness and well-being as individuals in after life, must necessarily depend mainly upon themselves—upon their own diligent self-culture, self-discipline, and self-control—and, above all, on that honest and upright performance of individual duty, which is the glory of manly character.

There was nothing in the slightest degree new or original in this counsel, which was as old as the Proverbs of Solomon, and possibly quite as familiar. But old-fashioned though the advice may have been, it was welcomed. The youths went forward in their course; worked on with energy and resolution; and, reaching manhood, they went forth in various directions into the world, where many of them now occupy positions of trust and usefulness. Several years after the incidents referred to, the subject was unexpectedly recalled to the author's recollection by an evening visit from a young man—apparently fresh from the work of a foundry—who explained that he was now an employer of labour and a thriving man; and he was pleased to remember with gratitude the words spoken in all honesty to him and to his fellow-pupils years before, and even to attribute some measure of his success in life to the endeavours which he had made to work up to their spirit.