

Other People's Business.

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"Alors, je te dirai, moi, que, si l'on ne se mêlait jamais que de ce qui vous regarde, on n'accomplirait que des actes médiocres et égoïstes."
"Notre Jeunesse."—M. CAPUS.

This quotation would form an excellent motto for a disquisition on social duty wider and more liberal in its views than can well be taught in early life. Most of us are born with so much desire to interfere with other people's business that an enormous proportion of the well-merited reproaches that we receive as children and young people are of the nature of "Don't meddle; it is no concern of yours; let her, him or them alone, and attend to your own work." But the lesson once learnt of respecting other people's individuality and attending to our own affairs, the time comes when it may be our duty to go beyond this elementary teaching, and then, too often, the man or woman of mature age and adequate experience is as culpably unwilling to be "mixed up" with what is called, rightly or wrongly, "other people's business," as the girl of fifteen, or the child of ten, was rashly masterful and over-eager to interfere.

I have read that in China when a crime is committed, the whole neighbourhood, in varying degrees, is held responsible; as an extreme instance, it is said that if a man kills his father the next door neighbours on each side have their ears cut off because they ought to have heard what was happening, and the opposite neighbours have their eyes put out because they ought to have seen. The principle is carried out with Eastern extremeness, but in itself it is a far nobler conception of social life and duty than that which in our most thickly populated streets permits long courses of calculated cruelty to be exercised on helpless children and feeble-minded girls. Few things are more painful than to find what a long list of neighbours will come forward to give evidence when the miserable victim has at last been done to death, or driven to commit suicide, compared with the meagre band of those courageous enough to interfere before it is too late.

There used to be a saying, "Let every man wallop his own nigger," and quite within recent days one has often heard the assertion, "I can do as I like with my own child." Nor was this opinion confined to the poor. The wife of a well-to-do professional man, the daughter of a judge, once told me how difficult

she had found it to teach her little girl, adding, "I often used to throw the book at her head. Of course I should not have liked a governess to do it, but she was my own child, so I could do as I liked." On inquiry I was thankful to learn that the unhappy child had been sent to a boarding-school, where these outward applications of learning were neither permitted nor practised.

Neither is this cowardly unwillingness to interfere confined to the poor. I have known persons received on apparently friendly terms by men and women of good social standing who at heart loathed them for their cruelty to some one or more of their children, and yet never made the smallest effort to put any check on it nor uttered a single word of disapprobation in public.

If it is hard to forgive social irresponsibility like this, it is still harder to excuse the smug selfishness of the man who, to use Spencer's words, "expending his energies solely on private affairs refuses to take trouble about public affairs, pluming himself on his wisdom in minding his own business, is blind to the fact that his own business is made possible only by maintenance of a healthy social state."

Our first duty may be to learn to let other people alone, but our next is to learn when to interfere, and how. "Other people's business" is, moreover, a question-begging phrase. Undeniably it must be wrong to meddle with other people's business, but the problem has to be settled, is it their business, and their's alone? We must remember that, as Stuart Mill expresses it, "A person should be free to do as he likes in his own concerns; but he ought not to be free to do as he likes in acting for another under the pretext that the affairs of the other are his own affairs." It must also be remembered that directly a person cannot look after his own business, it ceases to be solely his, and becomes someone else's—possibly ours. A rather aggressive Cabinet Minister once said, "Foreign affairs are England's affairs abroad," and from certain points of view everyone's business is our own. To make another quotation from the "Data of Ethics," "The improvement of others, physically, intellectually, and morally, personally concerns each, since their imperfections tell in raising the cost of all the commodities he buys, in increasing the taxes and rates he pays, and in the losses of time, trouble, and money, daily brought on him by other people's carelessness, stupidity, or unconscientiousness."

And when we work ourselves up to interfere in other people's business, why are our efforts so often a failure? Firstly, because we have

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