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Character Making on the Street

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The term street is used in a broad sense. I am to show the effect which street-life has upon all boys, but more particularly, perhaps, the effect which it has upon the boys called the "street boys." Character is not like money in the bank, it does not grow while we are asleep. The character of boys is made when they are wide awake, on the street, in the home, at work, at play, or at school. Of course very young characters are formed through imitating older people. Children learn to swear, to talk vulgarly and act as their parents and associates set the example. The boys who sell papers, black boots, messenger-boys and errand-boys, are directly influenced by the street and their characters are made by choosing from a wider circle of examples. The profane vocabulary of an experienced street boy, is much more copious than is that of a boy limited to one block or one street.

I want to present briefly, character-making on the street from three points of view. First, the home. I believe that environment has more to do with the making of character in boys than does heredity. Practice is more effective than preaching, even if it is only influencing street boys. Like produces like. Boys take on the characteristics of their environment. They take it on so fast that whereas they were once like wax, they soon become as hard as granite. Once they could have been moulded, but now, to bring out the angel, it needs not only a hammer and chisel, but an artist, inspired and directed from above.

A bad boy in a good neighborhood is conspicuous and comparatively rare. It is unnatural. Parents warn their boys not to play with him. There is no possible chance for that boy to be restored to good standing in his neighborhood until he conforms to the standard of conduct demanded by his environment. A boy in a good neighborhood does not need to be very bad to be ostracised. Now to be good in a bad neighborhood is just as uncomfortable as it is to be bad in a good neighborhood. The boy living under bad physical and moral conditions lacks the incentive to be a good, manly boy. The examples are wanting. What's the use? Who cares? Why should he make himself a target for the ridicule of his companions—become a "sissy" or a "mamma's boy?" If a clean face or a clean collar makes him conspicuous, why add a little dirt and all is well. If morally clean, swear a little, smoke a little, and the job is done. He conforms to his surroundings. It is often done without an effort and the new recruit of the street is often worse than one born amidst it all. Nearly everybody will say that the influence

of the street it bad. We all have a general idea of how it affects boy life—by what they see and what they hear. I will admit that when it comes to being specific it is difficult to tell how the street makes character. How often you hear such a remark as this: "I do not wonder these boys are bad, but that they are not worse than they are." It's a pity, but it's true. Look at the homes they come from, and how they have to spend so much of their time upon the streets. The streets are not so much to blame as are the people who live on the streets.

In looking for points for my subject, I asked a policeman where the worst districts lay from a policeman's point of view. "Over there." I asked the clerk of the school board from which sections of the city most of the truants came. "Over there." I found the saloons were numerous "over there," and the pool rooms, too. I looked up the character of the public schools, and found that they had more than an average proportion of the lowest grades "over there." The police wagon was a very frequent caller "over there." Poverty, drunkenness, crime and ignorance are necessary to character-making on the streets over there. How are the children who live in blocks of four, six, eight or ten tenements, each tenement containing as many children as there are tenements in the block, to have a chance to become morally, mentally and physically sound? They have churches; yes, a few. A mission; oh, yes, a harmless mission. A kindergarten—and that is all for over 3,000 boys. The strong churches are over here. The public library, the parks and other welfare work is over here. There are just about two ways of making the slums of our cities: Put in an unfair proportion of saloons, or, take out churches, libraries and schools, will make a slum of any community.

The rooms of these tenements are small, the buildings are crowded together and there is no place for children to play but the street. The police see that the boys do not play either baseball or football. Such strenuous games as marbles and top-spinning are tolerated. If to my imperfect description of the district "over there" you add a dismal railroad station, a freight yard, and a few docks for coal vessels, you get an idea of character-making streets of the wrong kind. It is only necessary for a boy to walk up and down these streets to have his character made.

When you inquire particularly into conditions you find that both father and mother have to work all day to support their families. Often the children are cared for by an old woman, in some instances a grandmother; more often a hired housekeeper. Some times it is an older girl, or in families where the girls are scarce, a boy. Just at the age when they need a firm hand

to guide and control them they have it not. They can do practically what they please as far as a restraining hand of father or mother are concerned. At night the parents are not in a physical condition to play quiet games with their children, or to have them play noisy games among themselves—and again it is the street for recreation and character-making. In many cases the father goes to the saloon and does not come home until the children are in bed. These are the ordinary conditions of life as we find them in the poorer sections of our large cities. Many are much worse and few are better.

When you come to analyze your district and divide it up you find exceptional conditions. Here is a street that has more low dives on it than any other street. There's another that is noted for its bloody fights and you do not care to travel it after dark. This street or that block is noted for "rushing the growler," or buying beer by the pail. Here and there you will find colors sadly mixed. Women who encourage strange men visitors, and so on. The boys see all of these things; they are neither ignorant nor blind. It certainly is to the credit of the boys that they are not worse than they are, and we can thank providence and our public schools for it.

The school is a new world and the poor boys and the boys from the worst of homes adapt themselves to their new environment. We may say that the good is to have a chance, an unequal chance as the school teachers think, but a mighty power for character-making of the street boy. Kindness and sympathy is the key to unlock the doors of the poor boys' heart. This influence continues for about nine years. The boys from such homes as I have described do not often make good scholars. They have not much help or encouragement at home. They do not come from a parentage that is able to transmit scholarly qualities. At fourteen years of age they should be ready to enter high school, but are often two, three and four years behind. In other words, they have finished their schooling with a mental equipment possessed by an average child of eleven or twelve years of age. The saddest part of it all is that they rarely learn any more. Of course there are exceptions.

Saturdays and holidays some boys will undertake to black boots, the money they earn being spent on cheap shows or possibly pitching pennies. There are boys who do not like school no matter how good the school or teachers may be. They play truant. They do not usually spend their time on the main streets, but on the side streets. You will often find them peddling bills or cards for some theatrical performances. Only cheap and usually nasty shows employ boys—and for his work, for running away from school, he is given a pass in nigger-heaven to see

the show. It is the boy who has money to spend, earned as indicated, who often gets into the police court. The vast majority of juvenile offenders in our courts are ignorant boys—mentally deficient or fatherless boys. The schools are a wonderful deterrent against crime. I think it is true with us and with most communities, that more boys are arrested during the long vacation of summer than any other period of the year. The Christmas vacation and the temptations of the great stores also tend to promote criminality among boys.

The attractive pictures on the bill boards help to make character on the street. I say a group of boys looking at a large bill board. One of them pointing to a picture said: "That's what I would like to see." It was a picture of a man pointing two revolvers at another man's head. What he wanted to see is largely what he wanted to be and to do. The theatres have much to do with character-making and the pictures on the bill boards have a great effect upon the imaginations of the boys of the street. There are many pictures on the boards, however, that have nothing to do with shows, that are corrupting to the minds of the boys by their suggestiveness of indecency. The business streets of our cities are usually decent and not degrading. There is a certain standard of conduct which is higher than the average of the individual, but the side streets, where profanity and vulgarity is not restrained by public opinion, often have a monopoly of the indecent advertising, and it is here where bare walls are often marked with coarse and indecent writing, done by the street boy.

It is not my purpose to blacken the characters of poor boys, but to try and show the effect which the street has upon them. The influence of the street is almost wholly bad, and if there were no God, no good men or women, no schools at work to save them, the boys would go to destruction. I know of nothing that would help more to improve the character-making of the street than for good Christian men and women to go and live on some of the streets which are now considered so very bad. The personality of God's children is needed to create a better environment. We must reverse the present tendencies—we must take out the bad and put in the good.