

THE MIND OF A CHILD.

BY MISS C. M. MASON.

"I believe he knows everything," says the young mother of the sturdy child in her arms, who responds to every shade of emotion in his mother's face, and it certainly is a curious thing to see the infant's face cloud or brighten with every such passing change. But we have no means of knowing what or how much baby understands; two or three poets it is true come to our aid; we see in the child's eyes "bright shoots of everlastingness." Traherne actually remembers the world he lived in while yet he was in his cradle. Wordsworth opens inviting doors for our speculations; but is all this safe ground and can we really look upon the infant as a "knowledgeable" person?

The last word offers a key to the situation; the least intelligent of us perceives that Baby is not "a huge oyster" as some of our physiologists would have us believe. He shows individual traits very soon, and before he is able to crawl declares himself a little gentleman or a vulgar little person; and this does not involve any question of class distinction; the little gentleman may often be seen in his mother's arms at a cottage door, while the common little bully may dominate a smart nursery.

No doubt children not only inherit characteristics but *reflect* their surroundings, and in an infant's face you may read the moods and manners of those about him; you know whether, as in that nursery life depicted by Gogol, the children are the only consideration, and knowing it become rude, violent and unruly while they are yet in arms, or whether, on the other hand, they perceive that they and those high authorities, their parents, are under a reign of law, that "I will" is servant to "I must." The child who grows up in this latter atmosphere

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does not dream that he is the centre of the universe and is from his infancy gentle, courteous and docile.

From such considerations as these we may make guesses at truth and believe that an infant is a person with a mind of his own. But we have a surer test; there are certain infallible signs which shew that baby is cleverer than any of us, judged by the very standards that we set for ourselves. Some of us are amazed at the facility with which our Belgian visitors have picked up English during the three years of the war; but then, their vocal organs had already been trained to speech, their minds were in the habit of receiving and their lips of expressing ideas; they already knew lots of words and had only to *translate* into another language. But think what it must be to learn to *articulate*—a more difficult art than that of perfect singing,—think of using words for the first time, of learning the fit words for many occasions, of perceiving for the first time the images, the ideas, which words express; think of learning such elemental ideas as far and near, hard and soft, hot and cold, wet and dry; of such moral ideas as good and naughty, kind and cruel, greedy and generous, clean and dirty, polite and rude, to name only a few. These things and a thousand more a child will acquire in the period it has taken the Belgian to learn English.

For these and other reasons we may safely conclude that a child is a person and that therefore a child has a mind, very active and intelligent. By the time he is three he can say all that he wishes to express in his own language; more, he is often bi-lingual, and I was once told

of a child who at that age could speak Arabic, German and English, addressing each language to the right person; that child had accomplished what would be the work of a life-time for most of us; not that he was specially clever, but that he had a nurse who spoke Arabic and a German mother.

When we realise that a child has a mind as hearty in its feeding as is his healthy little body, an exquisite though almost painful responsibility presents itself: we are awed in something the same way as when we look at the heavens through a telescope. "How shall we order the child?" we ask, the ordering being that of his mind rather for the moment than his body. Then, alas for the child! we make haste. We set strings of beads to dangle before his eyes when there is all the sweet world for him to look at; we teach him to button and to lace when there are a thousand inviting things for his fingers to do upon

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which muscles grow firm under the stimulus of his own eagerness.

We disregard the fact that during the first four or five years of life the child is under the care of a nurse more arbitrary than ever hailed from any institution. Hands off! she cries, when we meddle overmuch, and if we are wise we obey, because we know that she has had all experience and never makes mistakes. Nature is the child's guide, and circumstance the deft under-nurse. Nature teaches him to walk and talk and know in a surprising way, and circumstance gives the needful opportunities. It is well it should be so; were he not safeguarded from our zeal, the poor little being with so many heavy tasks on hand would be worn out by our efforts to help and direct. But Nature never tires him; she does not even let him perceive that he is being taught, when, behold, he knows!—and we just watch and wonder and hail each new achievement with delight.

A wise passiveness such as mothers use is our rôle in the early years; not out of tenderness for his "little" mind,—his mind is by no means little,—but out of reverence for all that he must accomplish in the first three or four years of his life; we must *envisage* his tasks in order that we may not hinder him by our premature efforts to help; and let us beware of every method, however engaging, which takes the task of early instruction out of the hands of Nature; she turns most of his lessons into play, and there "Mother" comes in—she joins in the play and is not afraid of a good romp.

But, also, the Mother has her tasks; she need not meddle with the child's mind, his so-called "faculties," but she must form the habits of a decent, ordered life, and *train* him in obedience, cleanliness and self-control. How all this is to be done it happily falls to other writers in our "Baby Number" to set forth.

But soon the time comes when the mind which has its own appetites and is as avid of food as is its partner, Brother Body, becomes clamorous; and this is a moment of nice consideration for the mother. The child of four or five puts out certain signals of distress; he becomes restless, his games and playthings do not satisfy him, he asks "why" with a persistency that is tiresome, because he hardly waits for the answer to his "why." The child's mother is aware of his uneasiness and says to herself, "It's time Bobby did lessons" or "went to a Kindergarten." The latter expedient is very tempting because the

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lessons are so like play that the mother does not see danger. But all the child's powers are carefully exploited and the thoroughness of the system and the charm of the teachers are in

themselves limitations and leave no room for natural growth. Until we get schools where the teachers know how to let the children alone and at the same time give them the knowledge they are restless for the want of, the easy ways of the nursery or of the cottage home are better for persons of four or five than the best ordered school.

What they should and what they should not have in the way of lessons at this stage is a rather baffling question. They are intellectually hungry and the obvious solution is regular lessons, but parents are rightly afraid of nervous overstrain; a well-grounded fear, because, while the mind of a young child is active, logical, in every way capable, the brain, that organ by means of which mind operates, is not yet in full working order, and we must not run risks. We are faced with the difficulty of an active principle, mind, whose organ of expression, brain, is yet in the act of becoming fit. "Hand and eye" work, or handicrafts and observation lessons are supposed to meet the difficulty, to instruct and train the child while they put little or no strain on the mind; this is true to a considerable extent, but the flaw in the argument is, that the *mind* of the child is fully capable; it is his *brain* that requires discriminating treatment, and all work of hand and eye is operated immediately by nerves which are the very substance of the brain. The fallacy that motor activities precede intellectual activities, that those spare the "brain" while these exhaust it, is probably answerable for the remarkable increase in the number of neurotic children belonging to the families of educated parents. Children who have carried soup tureens or cups of tea, or even threaded beads, at an age when little fingers are constrained by mere force of the will to please, run a grave risk.

The problem is one which the mother must work out for herself, with the help perhaps of some nice girl whom she will be able to train to be a wise and "passive" guardian for her children until lessons begin, say at six. Children want to know, and they may learn a great deal, but they must not perform that *act of knowing* upon which all the efficacy of lessons in the future must depend.

They may hear Bible tale and fairy tale, history tale and travel tale, all about birds and beasts; may know the wild flowers

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and the trees that come in their way by name and habitat, nay, they may even learn French words and phrases by hearing them often repeated; the one thing to be avoided is to make a child *tell* what he knows; of course he will tell a great deal, and that is well, but he must not be *required* to do so, whether for his own profit or for other people's gratification.

There are numbers of ways in which a child under six can use his mind and even his hands profitably in which no definite achievement is required of him. He can play shop with a real pair of scales and measure with a real footrule; the length of his pace can be ascertained and he can pace a given path or room and guess at greater distances. He may not be as smart as the London cabman who directs you,— "Where is Tomkins Street?" "First turn to the right, third to the left," but he may know that such and such a path or house or church is on the right—that is, as you are going, on the left as you are coming back. He may tell you the trees or the sorts of flowers he has noticed between such a gate and such a turning, the pictures on the right-hand wall as you go into the drawing-room, and so on, and this habit of observing will serve him well in after life. He may learn not only distance and position but also direction; he must learn the points of the compass and become able to step out east or west, so many paces this way and so many that. He should in fact spend most of his time out of doors, and should

get the ideas of boundaries, mountains, cities, plains, all the elements of geography, with the help of such mounds, pools, brooks and villages as he comes across in his walks. Then, we do not begin to know things until we can name them, and a wide range of natural objects should be as familiar to him as are robin and daisy. But all the store of information he gets must be given incidentally, when he chances to ask, What is it?

He can be taught to see, too; but his lessons should come to him as games, that is, he should not be required or expected to know with shut eyes “Ten things about the cow in that field”—“About that cottage garden” and so on, but he will know and will enter into the spirit of the game.

Indoors, every nursery has its occupations for wet afternoons and winter evenings. There are the nursery water-colours and crayons; plasticine or clay; paper cutting and folding (into cookyolly birds, boats and the like); puzzle maps, picture books, various needle-crafts (with big needles). There should be a ball frame and a box of dominoes for early counting; a box of letters,

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too, to be learned by sound, not name, for children under six may do a good deal of reading phonetically taught. Better still, there are numbers of *rondes* and other dancing games and every sort of round game that a small family can play. If the playroom is large enough, there are skipping rope, shuttlecock and ball games, all of which are very good, and better for young families than organised games like cricket. But I have treated the question of indoor and outdoor occupations [sic] elsewhere, and, moreover, it is a question likely to be more satisfactorily treated by other writers in our “Baby” Number; indeed, the lives of little children will no doubt be approached from various standpoints, and all that I am concerned to urge is the division of child life into at least three periods, each under its own general law:—Children under three or four who have so much to learn on their own account that any attempt to teach them either to do or to know is likely to prove disastrous.

Children from four to six, who are eager both to know and to do, and are at leisure to learn; but a certain want of nervous stability makes it undesirable that they should be *urged* to achieve with their hands, or tell what they know.

Children from six to eight, who are capable of much progressive work in a pretty wide range of subjects; these tell what they know with delight and show no signs of fatigue; they have arrived too at the nervous stability which enables them to fetch and carry, cut and build, and attain some degree of perfection in various small handicrafts.