

CONVERSATION PIECE

by OLIVE SCRIVENER

I

THE NERVOUS CHILD

‘Well, I don’t know, I’m sure—she is so very naughty at home and yet so good at school. “Conduct: Excellent”—we get on all her reports. ...’

The mother sighed and shook her head, giving the impression that there was nothing to be done about it.

But, I thought, something should be done about it, for Charlotte’s sake. Charlotte was ten years old. She was outstandingly musical, having played the piano from a very early age, and music was her chief joy in life.

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Her lessons she did conscientiously but, living in a world of her own, she found them difficult, more through lack of concentration than of ability.

‘Thank God He gave me music’, she said one day. ‘I’m not much use at anything else.’

Yet at her school she was happy. Her musical ability was recognised and her difficulties understood. No undue pressure was brought to bear on her although the standard of work was high, and she was given every encouragement.

The discipline was good and so there was a peaceful atmosphere, especially important to Charlotte who was so highly sensitive to environment.

Willing and dependable, she was always happy to help; and, as she was generous by nature, she had many friends.

No wonder her conduct was excellent.

But at home it was different.

Her difficulties were recognised but not wholly understood and her shortcomings were too often discussed in front of her.

Her over-anxious mother, wanting her to do well, insisted on outside private tuition every Saturday, when recreation was more important. Charlotte was indulged at every turn; every whim was gratified and there was no security of discipline.

Her every action was watched. ‘What are you doing?’ ‘Be careful!’ ‘Mind!’

Nervous anxiety can be very catching.

She was not allowed to ‘help in house or garden’ because of her week’s hard work at school—fond but misguided treatment.

But there was no rest: in such an atmosphere there could be no peaceful relaxation.

And during the holidays, without the steadying influence of school, Charlotte became even more highly-strung and excitable, reacting nervously to everything she saw or heard or did, thus earning the quite unjust reputation of being ‘so very naughty at home’.

‘Education is an atmosphere.’

II

THE NATURAL CHILD

'I'm afraid I laughed. She often says *that* at home, but I don't like children to be *too* good, do you? When mine come home from school they always tear round the house, letting off steam. ...'

So spoke the parent. She had waylaid me in the village street. 'Marigold tells me she got into trouble with you at school the other day for using a bad word.'

I had almost forgotten the incident, but my voice was firm as I said, 'I always jump on that kind of thing at once. We were very surprised to hear it from Marigold. She is so very quiet as a rule'.

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Later I thought about this conversation.

So often children who are usually quiet and reticent at school are just the opposite at home—self-assertive, undisciplined and not well-mannered.

But they know, with an instinctive wariness, that this kind of behaviour will not be tolerated at school, so they adopt a negative attitude that is safe and non-committal.

But it is unnatural and so the need to 'let off steam' is very real by the end of the day.

In Marigold's case I knew this to be true. There was not the spontaneous enjoyment of school life and her progress was slow.

On the other hand, children who meet with discipline at home from the first, and who take it all in their stride, are not dismayed when they come to school and find the same treatment. They settle in quickly and happily and their progress is rapid.

There is, I thought, a great need today for more discipline in the home, where children should be taught the same code of behaviour as they are at school—the habit of obedience, truthfulness, kind manners and generosity.

I wondered what Marigold's mother would have said if Marigold had told her, 'Oh, I learnt to say *that* at school and Miss Smith only laughs when we say it ...'.

'Education is a discipline.'

III

THE COMPLAINING CHILD

'Well, darling, what sort of day have you had? How did things go?'

'Oh, horribly! Miss Jones said I hadn't practised and I didn't get all my sums right and I don't like Felicity. ...'

This could have been a light conversation meaning nothing very much, but in Veronica's case it was something more. Every day regularly, as she climbed into the car to be driven home, this question was put to her.

And it was answered every day in very much the same way, until it had become a habit to paint a picture of a thoroughly dismal day, when probably it had been quite the reverse.

I tried to find a reason for this, for clearly it wasn't helping Veronica in her school life; she was unfriendly, disgruntled and unpopular.

I knew that she had lately had a new baby sister. Jealousy can be the cause of many

things and I wondered if Veronica was, in a strange way, asking for extra love and sympathy from her mother.

It could be this, I thought.

But I also wondered if, with a child's quick perception, she was giving the answer she thought her mother expected.

Parents do, alas, in these days, too often openly criticise their

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children's school or school-teacher. My own parents of Edwardian days chose my school with every care, but once having chosen it, its merits or defects were never discussed and consequently my loyalties were not divided and I loved and respected my school and my mistresses.

So, with this thought in mind, I discussed the question of Veronica's discontent quite openly with her mother.

'I know that schoolmistresses are there to be pointed at', I said, 'but don't do it in front of Veronica. How can she be loyal to her school or to her friends if she knows you don't approve of us?'

She was a little startled, but I knew the shot had gone home.

No more was said for a time but soon afterwards I was able to suggest to her that she should try to help Veronica to think positively instead of negatively, and so give her a gift for life.

'Now tell me about all the fun you have had today. What lovely stories have you heard? What games did you play?'

'Give her', I said, 'on every possible occasion, living ideas such as these, showing her the happiness and beauty to be found at every turn. You will soon have a happier and more contented daughter.'

And so it was.

'Education is a life.'