

At 11.20 a.m., MRS. CLEMENT PARSONS read her paper on

THE EDUCATION OF AN ONLY CHILD.

I am not going to say that I think it is an evil to be an only child. I know this is a debatable point, one of the many that are, of their very nature, never-ending, still-beginning, for, as with the others, it continues to be debatable just because there is so much to be advanced on both sides. Among the non-wealthy educated classes, the present generation is noticeably one of small families, where an only child is no rare bird, and, of course, it will remain for its successor to decide how this phenomenon will have operated for the general welfare and for the individual's happiness.

Turning again to economics—economics in some shape can never be long out of our thoughts—there is, of course, one very obvious advantage the only child possesses: whatever his parents may be able to spend on the nourishment, education, embellishment, and recreations of their offspring is, up to the limits of their goodwill, concentrated upon him. Other things being equal, an only son gets a more advantageous start in his profession, an only daughter has a surer prospect of financial independence of marriage, than

[p 610]

members of large families can look for. The innumerable things money puts one in the way of are not negligible quantities; they are very real "talents," in the Biblical steward's sense, opportunities. For the material outfit, for the gates set ajar at the entrance of the avenue towards worldly success, it is well to be an only child, and I can see nothing to be ashamed of in frankly counting these things as the real and enduring advantages which the only child holds over the brothered and sistered child. As a matter of fact they are ever present as advantages, in the minds, if not on the lips, of all sensible people.

Few things that present obvious advantages but do not, when looked at below the surface, manifest some corresponding disadvantages. Especially, I think, is this the case with the only child; so much so that his disadvantages have come to usurp the place in popular estimation of his really more obvious advantages.

Formerly, in moving about in the world, how often one heard when in society a youth was bumptious or a girl showed signs of selfishness, "Ah, but you must make allowances for an only child"—the inference being that an only child was an animal brought up on the adulation and over-indulgence of its fatuous parents! In the period of Douglas Jerrold and Kenny Meadows the only child of popular legend was synonymous with the "spoilt" child, as we see him in *Heads of the People*, seated on the dinner table, and brandishing his father's watch and chain among the shards of the decanters and wine glasses. It was a self-descriptive note of the period, by the way, that the sole interpretation it recognised of the word "spoilt" was "over-indulged."

But nowadays, owing to the spread of the feeling of parental responsibility, another phase has set in, and our "spoilt" only child is a harried and over-supervised and over-scrutinized being, whose parents have never been able to forget the fact of his natural handicap, and in consequence have never let him *be* for a single day since he was born. In their over-anxiety on the score of their child's "onliness" they have lost the simple and common-sense outlook, and forgotten the golden promise that in quietness and in confidence shall be their strength.

The impressive and conscientious mother (the mother of an

[p 611]

only child is pretty sure to be impressible and conscientious) goes to stay with friends, and in their house observes another child, another only child. She comes home fired with envy to have *her* child like *that* child. For a month consecutively, and intermittently longer, the attempt is made. The nurse and governess (the typical “only” child is pretty sure to have a resident governess) are dragged into the plot—they must conform to the new ideal. Phyllis is to be brought up on the lines on which Sybil is being brought up. So the new ideal is introduced, and it does not prove a good fit. Among minor evils, Phyllis learns to detest the very name of Sybil, and, as time goes on, of the various other Sybils whose temperaments and manners her mother tries to graft upon her. Meanwhile, let it not be omitted in the relation that return visits have taken place, and with the result that Sybil herself, the ideal only child, has in her turn been more or less remoulded according to the original type of Phyllis. Finally (and the *dénouement* somehow reminds one of the last scene in an old-fashioned comedy) Sybil and Phyllis themselves meet, and each confides healthfully to the other how her mother made the rival child a watchword and an ideal, and how she herself writhed under the superimposition. Such are the ways of the typical mother of an only child. Had Phyllis’s mother possessed three or four children the fancy-experiments would at least have been distributed, they would not have been concentrated in their full rigour on the hapless one. But, as a matter of fact, mothers of several children sooner learn the necessary wisdom of letting them walk where their own natures would be leading.

The disadvantages of being an only child cut deeper than I have outlined in the case of Phyllis. An only child is in danger of developing or retaining a multitude of inefficiencies. For him the fellowship and fun of nursery family life have never existed, that deprivation alone bringing with it a hundred detriments. There has been no one to dare him to do things, no one to egg him on to the valuable experiences of innocent mischief, no one to stimulate him into becoming ingenious and, in the best sense, able-bodied. It is melancholy to realise that an only girl may reach the ripe age of eighteen and never have played rounders in her life, nor even pulled the cork out of a seltzer-water bottle. In a large [p 612]

family the natural laggard is chaffed out of muffishness into becoming handy and self-helpful and, as a rule, of course, there are not servants enough to do everything for everybody, so the children, to their great advantage, must do some things for themselves. Again, what is garden life to an only child? My heart has ached to watch an only child trying to play in a garden quietly and alone, week in, week out. I contrast it with the shouts and glee that resound from another garden, where a family of children are at play and their endless business together. How is the lonely child to learn reasonable unselfishness, how is he to learn to put a good face on disappointment and a smile on pain, except in the tonic company of other children around him in his home? His parents, measuring him by himself, may fancy him a fine fellow, but how are they to *judge*, short of that test? “I cannot praise,” says Milton, “a cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed.”

But the secret of life is to make the most out of what one has, and so I would remind you that there are antidotes and palliations for every one of the disadvantages I have been naming. When, in the trivial affairs of existence, we cannot get the best materials, what do we do? We take the next best, and often, by our manipulation of them, make them into a better thing than what originally started as the best. So in this matter of the only child. He has no natural brothers and sisters, we must procure him artificial ones. We must by all means send him to school, and to a good kindergarten from the earliest. Solitary education is the one great danger for an only child. It accentuates his disabilities and blocks their

remedies. In my opinion, co-education schools, the most interesting educational experiment in our community, specially appeal to the parents of the only child, for, as the father of an only son at the best known one of them was saying to me the other day, *there*—in the co-education school—the only boy gets a pretty complete notion of the ways of little sisters, the only girl of brothers.

But schools of any kind only represent half a child's education, often less than half. What the isolated child specially lacks is the home companionship of children. Having them now and again to tea is not enough. To educate one another, children must be together from the

[p 613]

rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same—the programme to be recommenced next day. This is the point in the education of an only child on which I would lay particular stress. To me it is the cardinal one. I often think, with reference to children, of Goethe's aphorism that talent forms itself in solitude, but character can only grow in society; and, at the present time, more even than ever before, it is character that is the pearl of great price, the lever of the world. Therefore, I would urge upon every parent of an only child to let him be as much with his cousins and other contemporaries as possible. Bit by bit, in these wholesomer conditions, he casts those tendencies to priggishness and over-fastidiousness, which infect often the finer-fibred among only sons.

Another corrective of the characteristic "onliness" of the only child is to let him know something familiarly of the children of the poor. To stay for a week or ten days with his nurse's people in the green and flowerful country, is a broadening experience for your only boy. Insight into real life from a new angle is the most precious piece of knowledge that can come to any of us, and it is more precious to the only child than to anyone else.

Utilise other people's children. I think that every only child would be the better for having a little succession of children to stay during half, at least, of all his holidays—and for himself going to stay in the households of other children. In that way he gets a good working substitute for what he lacks under his own roof-tree, and this is the true "Education of an Only Child"—where it needs to be different, I mean, and peculiar. The only child's general education is naturally the same thing as the many-brothered child's.

Hard trials come at first to an only child in his dealings with other children. However much he enjoys their company, it must inevitably bring with it a clashing of wills, which is very soon mutually manifest. On such occasions, the entrance of the only child's mother is well-timed. She is appealed to instantly by her own child, accustomed to bring her his grievances, and then in self-preservation by the little visitor, who stands on his rights as a visitor. A child sets a—to us—ludicrous value upon the rights of the guest, especially when himself figuring in that capacity. A child of six returns

[p 614]

from a rather condescending visit to a considerably younger child—

"Well, dear, did you enjoy having tea with little Vera?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because she wouldn't let me draw her white lamb about, and she *ought* to have given it up to me."

"My dear, she's a baby."

"I know that, but she was in her own nurs'ry."

As I was going on to say, the timely entrance of the child's mother will almost certainly awake the sweet spirit innate in childhood and, likelier than not, turn selfishness into an almost extravagant generosity. At a well-made appeal the warring children will be melted into kindness, outdoing each other in their willingness to give up, in honour preferring each other. I think it is easier to meet each child's obduracy when the two are together hearing what one says, than when one takes to task alone afterwards the survivor of the battle. When they are together, each child watches the other for the first sign of the change of front each is secretly desiring; usually the elder child is the first to give in, and then at once the younger will follow suit.

The sovereign potency of imitation in the formation of habit is another reason why the only child should both go to school from the earliest and have other children at frequent intervals to share home life. Where there are numbers necessity induces virtues, of which there is only a languid need in the only child's natural surroundings. At home, if the only child doesn't "feel like" picking up his few toys when he has done playing, he doesn't pick them up, and it gives the nurse so little trouble to do so for him that she does not bother to enforce the useful nursery rule. In a large family the case is otherwise, in a kindergarten class the case is otherwise, therefore if you don't give the child the first of these educative influences by all means see that he gets the second. It is not the general exhortations made by the teacher about neatness that make the child neat, so much as the sight of how neat the other children are.

You will soon discover, by-the-by, which are going to be the best children (I mean the most rightly educative children) for your only child to associate with. This you will possibly [p 615] not find from your few minutes of rather ceremonial contact with the strange children themselves, but you will as you read between the lines of your own child's unsolicited communications casually made to you next day. I should say that the constructive, busy-fingered children are the best companions for the only child, they will give him most of what he gets least of in his home.

Every only child should be taught the technique and given the outfit of a handicraft or two. These cheerful activities will take him out of himself, and make him happy, and they will also lay the foundation of his becoming later that welcome creature, a man with useful hands, who can do something in an emergency. Everyone would be better for knowing practically how to do the humblest things, laying a fire, for instance, or mending a blind-cord. I was reading the other day a forcible inculcation of this utilitarian element in education in a volume by Mr. Freeman-Mitford, containing translated Japanese sermons (of the 17th century?). A preacher tells the following story:—"It happened that, once, the learned Nakazawa went to preach at Ikéda, in the province of Sesshiu, and lodged with a prosperous family. The master of the house, who was particularly fond of sermons, entertained the preacher hospitably, and summoned his daughter, a girl some fifteen years old, to wait upon him at dinner. This young lady was not only extremely pretty, but also had charming manners; so she arranged bouquets of flowers, and made tea, and played upon the harp, and laid herself out to please the learned man by singing songs[.] The preacher thanked her parents for all this, and said—"Really it must be a difficult thing to educate a young lady up to such a pitch as this." The parents, carried away by their feelings, replied—"Yes; when she is married, she will hardly bring shame upon her husband's family. Besides what she did just now, she can weave garlands of flowers round torches, and we had her taught to paint a little"; and as they began to show a little conceit, the preacher said—"I am

sure this is something quite out of the common run. Of course she knows how to rub the shoulders and loins, and has learnt the art of shampooing?' The master of the house bristled up at this and answered—'I may be very poor, but I've not fallen so low as to let my daughter learn shampooing.' The

[p 616]

learned man, smiling, replied—'I think you are making a mistake when you put yourself in a rage. No matter whether her family be rich or poor, when a woman is performing her duties in her husband's house, she must look upon her husband's parents as her own. If her honoured father-in-law or mother-in-law fall ill, her being able to plait flowers or paint pictures will be of no use in the sick room. To shampoo her parents-in-law and nurse them affectionately, without employing either shampooer or servant-maid, is the right path of a daughter-in-law. Do you mean to say that your daughter has not yet learnt shampooing, an art which is essential to her following the right path of a wife?'" I need scarcely tell you that in old Japan a woman when she married became merged in the family of her husband.

An only child may dream, if he prove so inclined, but he must never be suffered to mope, and here—though it may seem a trivial point—I would suggest that the parents of an only child should be on their guard to check in themselves that hyper-sensitiveness to noise which the very fact of there being a solitary child in the house encourages. I have known a mother of an only child who had so got out of the way of children's natural shouts and trappings, that she put a veto on her ewe lamb having friends to tea who had once been convicted of making themselves heard through the ceiling.

The parents of an only child do well to resist the temptation to have their child continually with them. To be continually with his parents is not for the child's good—let alone the parents'! For one thing, there is the danger of his being shown and told everything and left to find out nothing. I do not believe that anybody would be the better for an exclusive association with intellectual superiors[.] The poorer mind may not be of a nature to be over-excited and overwrought; but in that case another evil arises: it is led to adopt its opinions instead of thinking them, and finds a short cut to points to which it would be better it should fight its way. Clever, positive-minded people ought particularly to beware of letting their children grow into forlorn parrots of themselves. The truth is that there is one path to wisdom, and only one—the path of thought—whoever gets your only child into the habit of thinking will have put him in the way of a liberal education.

[p 617]

Another rock ahead of the only child that must be, as it can be, avoided, comes from the naturally greater frequency of his sojourns downstairs than is the case where there is a nursery-full of children. One's visitors are apt to ignore the presence of the one single child, provided he be good and apparently occupied. They are full of their views and criticisms, and forget the child, as some people forget servants. The result is that the acute little listener—at the lunch-table, it may be—hears information or gossip, harmless in itself, but not fitting a child's age and discretion; or things are said before her (I think she is oftenest a little girl) that are calculated to destroy her freedom from snobbish estimates.

The grown-up world is often strangely irresponsible in its attitude towards the moral sensibilities of children; and I remember a writer on education somewhere quoting Taine, who in his memoir of Prosper Mérimée, tells how once when as a boy Mérimée had been severely scolded for some fault and sent out of the room in tears and deep dejection, he heard through the door a laugh, and someone saying, "The poor child! How angry he thinks us!" "The idea of being their dupe revolted him," adds Taine, and he refers to such

treatment Mérimée's self-repression and suspicion of confidence in after-life. "To act and write as though always in the presence of an indifferent or mocking spectator," was a marked trait of Mérimée's character.

In what I have lately been saying I am aware that I may have strayed beyond the education specifically of an only child; and indeed there is so very much in an only child's education that is identical with the education of all children, that I must beg you to forgive me if I have occasionally throughout this paper gone outside the scanty plot of ground specially assigned me. It was impossible to do otherwise.

There is one distinct advantage in being an only child, and that is that an only child makes friends quicker than members of large families seem as a rule to do. I think there is something of the nature of a high brick wall built round many large families, inside which they live as in a sort of sacred "Pink City" of their own, where they exhale mutual admiration. They have so many ready-born friends within the wall that they rarely feel that passionate need of sympathy which impels the lonely youth out to seek for it. I just say [p 618]

this, lest I should have given the impression anywhere that I look upon a large family as a natural school of all the virtues. Perhaps I use the wrong word, and should have said "graces" for "virtues," for I think that the hardy virtues certainly do flourish in large families, but the graces not so often. There is always a tendency in large families to brush away the veil of romance and the ideal, and it must be a fact of general observation that men who have never had a sister are peculiarly gentle and considerate to women. A large family is apt to be a close co-operation, heedless of outsiders, putting on no winning airs to attract them, and when one of its members does go out, as it were a spy into the world of men, he comes back—I quote from the mine of just observation called *Weir of Hermiston*—virtually with "the good news that there is nobody to compare with his own brothers and sisters, no official that it would not be well they should replace, no interest of mankind, secular or spiritual, which would not immediately bloom under their supervision." I have heard little girls who belong to large families boast at a rate that no only child but would find it extremely difficult to keep pace with, though, as we know, most little girls are tolerably competent at a boasting contest.

In a sense, every remarkable person has been an only child. There is no loneliness like the loneliness of an original mind in a family of average and comfortable brothers and sisters. How great his loneliness is may be best judged by the pathetic way in which all through the after years he clings to the one member of his family, usually a sister, who least misunderstood his early visions, aspirations, and rebellions. In a large family party there may be as much chatter as among a twittering flight of birds, but little true intimacy. The brothers and sisters in many a large family live all their lives on parallel lines and never touch. Their intercourse is strictly social; they know one another, but they know little *of* one another.

To return to the only child. *An upbringing apart from other children* is the one evil for an only child. Parents of only children have but to read with open eyes the story of Ruskin's childhood to realize what a taint that solitary period spread over Ruskin's character all his life long. Dreamy and dogmatic, Ruskin remained a typical specimen

[p 619]

of "The Only Child." He had been so unaccustomed to wholesome contemporary criticism in his boyhood that he was intolerant of it in his maturity. To Ruskin belonged just the impracticability of social theory, just the whimsical, captious interpretations of art, just the

peevishness, and just the grotesque egotism and shameless self-contradictions that might reasonably have been augured from a childhood spent as his was. His glowing genius, by enlarging his personality, accentuated his sad defects, all essentially and supremely defects arising from a wrong system of educating an only child.

Next to the remedy for “onliness” of being much with other children in his and their home life, I should place in the education of an only child a large measure of being out in the country, with all the delightful interests the country suggests. Without going out of one’s way, without making oneself a slave to one’s child, one can do so much in the way of giving him interests, and fathers, I think, shine particularly in this department. Next to out-of-door interests come pet animals. The necessity of regularly feeding his dumb “brethren” exalts the ownership of them from among wanton pleasures into one of the most charitable of all. Present-giving, by which I mean especially present-manufacturing, should be another element in educating an only child.

Some of those who have been hearing this paper read must from time to time have been themselves asked by a mother, “How am I to know just how to bring up my only child?” There is but one answer to this question—we cannot know, we can but do our best with the best sense we can bring to bear. Discouragements day by day are inevitable to all parents—whether of only or numerous children, and so are doubts and misgivings and hesitations and fallings back upon ourselves. But we fall and rise again, confident deep down within us that somehow “the smooth” will ultimately “bloom from the rough.” As for the manner of approaching one’s child, of getting at him, there is but one rule, sympathise with him. Begin each morning afresh by imagining yourself your child. It is only when this has become a habit that you can understand how each action and word of yours must really affect him, what impression he receives from it. There will be fewer

[p 620]

“don’ts,” but more reasonable explaining, and also, I think, there will be more genuine mirthfulness in common between you; and even with the youngest child there is no better way of engraving a lesson than with the edge of a jest. No one should ask of a child tasks beyond his strength. Remember that every power and virtue in him is still only at its weak beginning period. His parents’ suggestion must be the lamp unto his feet, and their encouragement the light upon his path.

Let us do what we can to remedy our only child’s natural disabilities, and then do our best to forget, and make him forget, that he is an only child. Patience, repose, stability, these are gifts parents most need—not to be feverishly looking for results as we go along, nor digging up the little seeds we have sown to see how they are getting on underground. Every vital process must necessarily be gradual and subject to drawbacks, and it is madness to expect to eat a loaf of bread out of the growing wheat. The method we ought to reverence and take as our model is the method of first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. Something must always be left in a spirit of faith to nature and God’s providence. More springs in the garden than the gardener ever planted, and that more does not consist of weeds alone. There is tuition and there is also intuition.

Parents are the instruments, but they are not to be the all in all. Room must be left for some independent action, for many an unsuggested impulse, for self-reliance, for temptations and trials, with their natural results of victory with self-respect or defeat with remorse. Take off sometimes “the bridle and the blinkers” and set the child on “the barebacked horse” of his own will. By such treatment his moral nature being amply exercised will be seasonably strengthened; and, when he comes into the world as a man, he

will come with a man's weapons of defence; whereas, if the child be constantly over-protected, he will come into the world a moral weakling.

"Mary ... pondered all these things in her heart." The divine mother did not fuss or interfere. That she could remonstrate we know, though it was with infinite gentleness. "Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? Behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing." It seems to me that we often place too little trust in the silent, forceful pressure of example, and expect too much from meddling and direct

[p 621]

measures. We ought to try to be more like Mary, who prayed and stood aside, pondering all things in her heart, for it is with her that we find the ideal, invincible motherhood.

If, little by little, one can teach and encourage one's child to love work, till he ends by desiring it as, next to love, the greatest of life's boons, one will have done much, and still more if next to the love of work one can communicate to him the art of enjoying the enjoyable. Then he will know how to live, and that will not be a trifling success, seeing how small is the proportion, even among so-called educated people, of those who may properly be said to know how to live. Should anyone present be desiring an educational manual, let me recommend one that is both new and true, a book to be laid to heart by parent and educator. It is called *La Vie Simple*, by Charles Wagner, many of you may know it already. The same author has written another volume, *Jeunesse*, but *La Vie Simple* is a miracle of insight into present-day needs in habits, ideals, and the general orientation of our lives.

Finally, did anyone ever give a lecture of this kind, I wonder, without being feelingly reminded of Portia's words, "I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching"? After all, training a child is so great an art that with every desire and effort to obtain proficiency in it, mistakes and lapses are almost unavoidable. The great thing is not to be unduly discouraged by mistakes and lapses, not to be afraid to acknowledge we were less wise than the occasion demanded. Another time we shall do better. Mercifully it is so in life.