

MARGARET MACMILLAN; “COMPANION OF HONOUR”

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SHE was born in New York State at Westchester in 1860, of Highland stock. But her third year saw the death of her father, the loss of what little money they had, and a return of her mother and her two sisters to Scotland. She was a dark-eyed, black-haired girl, musical and highly strung, with figure well knit to meet the struggle of life, thrown back for years upon her inner resources by deafness due to scarlet fever, which did not pass till she was twelve. In that inner world she was hearing voices, like Saint Joan. As she said in later years, “Beyond these voices there are others, and the others matter most.” Already at school she was at heart a rebel, her heart going out to the unruly boys held in by fear of “the tawse,” and reacting against a system which made the girls into ridiculous snobs, having nothing to do with girls attending the cheaper schools. Puzzled by the obvious unfairness of life, she voraciously read books stowed away out of sight in an uncle’s cistern closet.

Both she and her elder sister go out into life as “finishing governesses.” There was not much choice in those days for women who had to earn their living respectably. As governesses they got to know the household life of the monied classes, and Margaret is befriended by Lady Meux, who sees in her a born actress, and has her trained in voice production and music. Rachel is caught by the new Socialist teaching of the early eighties, which released within her “a sudden inrush of new consciousness.” This was just what Margaret was waiting for. She catches the enthusiasm, reads Karl Marx, learns somehow to blend him and William Morris and Jesus Christ. She sees the wrongness of a social order which thwarts and stunts what is highest in human life; and after the week spent in training, a Sunday morning sees her with her sister at the Dock gates, for the great Dock Strike is raging. Soon she is on a platform, haranguing the crowd in Hyde Park.

The great stronghold of the Labour Party at this time is Bradford. Bradford calls her, and she goes; *Miseris succurrere disco* is her family motto. The words were spoken by a woman, and she finds in them now the central purpose of her life. She learns to

succour those that suffer. She keeps herself by lecturing and writing. The fee for an article is ten shillings and sixpence, the fee for a lecture is five shillings. But her elder sister holds on to her work as governess, and sends her regular remittances. This companionship of the two sisters in their work for the children of the poor is a romance of our time.

The Labour vote gave her a seat on the Bradford School Board. She devotes herself to health, and especially the health of the younger children. Without health, teaching is vain, and hope for a better future equally futile. But it was never her idea to institutionalize the child. She wants the institution called school to help the home. Here is what she writes to overworked mothers:

Why, you have only to show the little one that he lives in a fluent moving world where everything moves and strives—that air and water are his best friends (you had better show him what happens when he breathes, and when he washes): that there is a Force keeping the particles of his spoon together; that there is another Force keeping his stool on the floor; that the winds have a path; and the light makes a long journey; and he will begin to live reverently as well as joyously. It will be very difficult for him to become a brute or a snob in later years. He will probably never bore people by his bigotry, or vex them by his cynicism, or bring them to despair by his self-conceit. It will be difficult, because what we learn from loving lips is knowledge that is vital. It will be difficult, because the great truths we learn in childhood we live by always. It will be difficult, because even these few truths I have stated suggest the whole problem and mystery of life.

Added to the normal drawbacks of an overcrowded industrial town, with its sunless streets, and back-to-back houses, foul air and lack of green places for play and flowers, she has to face the half-time system, with its children of eleven and twelve spending half the day in the mill and the other half in school. Of what use was it trying to teach in the afternoon a child who had had six hours in the mill beginning at 6 a.m.? These things can not be altered without long agitation, but there is something that can be done at once. A school Doctor is appointed. In six months she has a school bath opened in one of the most primitive of the Board schools. "I believe that all children are by nature clean", is the first article of her creed. She establishes a system of school meals for necessitous children. She convinces the authorities that special provision must be made for mental defectives. In all these things she was working far ahead of what the educational system of the day allowed, and the Official Auditor had to strain many points from time to time to square the expenditures incurred with

the provisions of the Act. But her Council was so clear that she was pioneering on right lines that the law had to come limping behind her advance, if haply in time it might catch up. The permanent Secretary of the Board of Education admitted that during her eight years Bradford had so beset the Board with new problems and doubtful expenditures that it had been in bad odour with officialdom, but he considered that "such activity did Bradford credit." It is good for officialdom to have private individuals forcing the pace for them, just as it was good for the English to have the Irish alongside; "it keeps them from getting too settled in their minds."

Bradford was inevitably a prelude for London. If medical inspection and the provision of healthy school conditions had proved themselves incontestably to be of incalculable benefit to Bradford children, then these same benefits must be made available for all. In 1902 she came to London; her sister joined her. Here she threw herself into the Women's Franchise Movement; for if the child was to receive the attention of legislators, the mother must have her say in the choice of them. But she does not forget the central purpose of her life. Only, now her objective is changed. At Bradford she worked for the child of school age. Now she concentrates on the years one to six, the years between generation and education. "You must not call me an educationalist", she says, "I am no such thing." Her aim is to establish a new type of Health Centre. Bathrooms were to be classrooms. There was to be treatment for adenoids, teeth and all remediable defects, together with new methods for speech-training and singing. Joseph Fels, soap boiler of Philadelphia, offered £5,000 to help to start her new venture. George Lansbury, now leader of His Majesty's Opposition, and the Countess of Warwick helped her. But she refused to start it as a private venture. She sees that the only way to secure permanence for her work is to link it with a statutory body. So she lays siege to the London County Council and the Board of Education in Whitehall. Her activities are incessant and ubiquitous. She visits the continent of America. She lectures wherever she can find an audience. She bombards the Press. "Get a Medical Department"; "Sweep out disease"; "Enrich teaching by a new influx of knowledge of a physiological kind"; "Nurture is the base of the whole educational process":—These were her slogans. She had but scanty scientific education herself, but love has a wonderful way of discerning what it is a child needs, and of finding out from conversation with those who know and from books how a child's need is best met. Her work is a striking proof of the power of sym-

pathy as a factor in intelligence. It was certainly a glowing heat of love which supplied the driving power to her executive work.

At Whitehall she found a whole-hearted friend in the greatest English civil servant of his time, Sir Robert Morant. He was the author of the great Education Act of 1902 which unified the educational system of England, and set it working on the right lines for the striking development which, in spite of the War, has gone on continuously since that date. In 1906 the House of Commons provided for compulsory medical inspection. The provision of clinics followed. These, as could easily be seen, were the unavoidable corollary of inspection. Progressive authorities under an optional clause began at once to provide treatment, the Board exercising steady pressure on its behalf. It became statutory in 1918. It was a high day for Margaret MacMillan when Sir Robert sent her the first clean proof of the first Annual Report of the first national system of school medical inspection that England had known.

She now turned all her attention to the needs of the pre-school child. The demonstration of her nursery school at Deptford is described by Dr. Arnold Gesell of Yale as a "revolutionary change in the health, happiness and activities of children", and by Dr. J. G. Kerr, medical officer of the education authority of London, as "the greatest single contribution to education in our time."

Her nursery school was in a garden, buildings were mere accessories; the children were to grow up in the fresh air. The garden was in the midst of the slums. She began with an old churchyard which was placed at her disposal. By day she has her pre-school children. The little toddles come in at 8 o'clock in the morning, they are bathed and fed, they spend the day in the fresh air. Shelters are provided for wet weather, but they are of the sanatorium type. There is colour everywhere, on the table, on the walls, on their pinafores, and in the garden. It is the glory of the garden, with its freedom for movement, with its sunshine, its birds and growing things, which is essential to right "nurture." After nine hours the young ones go home and there come in the ailing "pretubercular" children, older children whom Miss MacMillan and the Doctors have selected, and here they spend the night in the sweet fresh air with the stars to watch over them. Here the rickets disappear, and the incidence of measles is .5 per hundred, whereas for the other children in Deptford it is 7. The cost per head for the pre-school children is £11.15s, and half of that is paid by parents.

The apparatus is of the simplest: "A pipe and hose were fixed over the yard drain and enclosed with canvas fastened down with

stones in the hem. This cold shower cost 2s 9d, and it was more amusing than a tiled and marbled indoor bathroom." Such was her first experiment. It became the Mecca of the new movement that is spreading all over England and Scotland. And at Deptford in course of time was founded the College to train a sufficient number of teachers for the rapid development of her idea, a College which the Queen opened in May, 1930. Walter de la Mare has described it, but having come to describe an institution he found himself absorbed in trying to fathom and understand the woman who was its centre, living like Pestalozzi with the children "clinging around her." There is no mistaking in her the Hieland blood. She is in this world, steering her way thro' all sorts of obstacles and counter currents, but all the time she is a denizen of another world, and "her presence of mind is due to her absence of mind." She is a follower of the gleam, living in to-day, but "lighting her torch at the sun of to-morrow". And that is the secret of her never-ceasing outpour of active benevolence.

It has been said of George Washington that "God left him childless that he might be a father to his country." How Margaret MacMillan was left childless, is delicately hinted to us by the book,* and no person with delicate feeling would wish to know more. But the sorrow that robbed her of motherhood did not rob her of mother heart. "No children for me, then all children shall be mine" was the run of her thoughts. She loved the children with a real mother love, loving most those that were marred by disease, the least attractive, least lovable. If they failed to respond, it was her fault. She must love them more. Such love knows no defeat. Its motto is not only "The utmost for the highest", but "The utmost also for the lowest whose need is greatest."

**Margaret MacMillan, Prophet-Pioneer*; by Dr. Albery Mansbridge. Harrage, 6 shillings. All profits devoted to the Health Centre at Deptford.