

## A DRAWING-ROOM TALK.

### THE NATURE AND NURTURE OF THE CHILD.

By SISTER OLIVE.

I want this afternoon to speak of the nature and nurture of the child; it must perforce be a very elementary talk, because the subject is so large. We have only just begun to study the child scientifically. Men like Darwin, Pueyer, and others have made valuable records of their observations, which are of intense interest, and there are many workers studying the influence of heredity in the race. In olden days, the three Fates came to the cradle, and made gifts to the child; in Scandinavia, the young child was visited by three Norms, who brought presents of the past, present, and future. What are the modern terms for Fates and Norms? (1) Heredity, *i.e.*, what the infant is or has its start with; (2) Function, what it does in the course of its activity; and (3) Environment, the influences that play upon it during life. The first is as yet to some extent beyond our control; the second and third are controllable, and I think those who should control them are the lovers of little children.

There is ever a controversy between the learned as to the respective parts played by heredity and environment; while some say sweepingly with Disraeli that race is everything, there are others that say that environment is the prime factor in the life of the individual. We cannot be wrong if we say both have great influence; we will leave the respective values to be discussed *ad nauseam* by those to whom it appeals.

First, let me say a few words about the nature of the child, *i.e.*, the influence of heredity. Our start in life is not haphazard, but is determined by our parentage and ancestry. We have familiar proverbs: "What is bred in the bone comes out in the flesh"; "Like begets like"; "He is a chip of the old block." That there are inborn characteristics is undeniable; take for example longevity, short-sightedness, colour blindness.

The child is a complex product of past generations—a literal reproduction of its parents and ancestors—but it is also an original. The saying that "Like begets like" must be modified into "Like tends to beget like." There is unity in diversity.

But just as we do not gather grapes off thorns, figs off thistles, orange pippins off crab-apple trees, neither do we get a fine specimen of the human race from a degenerate stock.

Environment may determine if the grapes are fine or withered, the figs large or stunted, the orange pippin a prize fruit or a poor specimen, but no favourable environment can convert the thorn into a grape.

In 1866, an Austrian abbot, Mendel, published the results of his experiments, made in the garden of his monastery, on the crossing of peas, and deduced laws of inheritance; his fine pioneer work is the basis for the study of inheritance in plants and animals, and may possibly apply to humans. True, the complexity, or the mosaic of inheritance, is infinitely more difficult to study in humans than in peas, many of the theories and so-called laws of inheritance do credit to the imaginations of their authors, if they do nothing else.

When a baby is born, its physical likeness to its parents and ancestors is always a subject of discussion. Environment has already played its part for nine months, and some of its peculiarities may be due to nurture; but the likeness to its forbears is sometimes most dramatic: the turn of the ear, the shape of the brow, the setting of the eyes, &c., of father, mother, or some ancestors are startlingly reproduced, and besides this physical inheritance there are latent abilities, tendencies, capacities, that may or may not be brought out by function and environment.

We are perhaps more apt to attribute our weakness and failings to our ancestors than our abilities, to which we claim credit elsewhere, but it is unscientific! Happy the child that has "a goodly heritage," we start unequal—no socialism or democratisation can overcome that, if they can give equal opportunities and fairer environments to all.

You will, I hope, see therefore that in Infant Welfare Work it is first necessary to study the family history. As a rule we cannot go back very far, but it is an immense help in dealing with the baby to know the parents, the mother and the father, and if we can know its grandfathers and grandmothers, so much the better. The health history and the character of the parents are as essential to the wise upbringing of the child, as a knowledge of how its functions are trained, and the environment that moulds it. The art worker studies his material—clay, marble, gold—and his success in producing beauty will depend largely on his knowledge of his material. If abundant and reliable data were procurable about the child's ancestry, we could deal with each life more successfully than we do. Everyone should know something of heredity, and especially those who are concerned with infant care. We

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