

—Monthly Letter June/July 1952—

No one who came in contact with Dr. Montessori could help being affected by her: she spoke with the vigour of the old Prophets; her words seared the soul of those who could feel. Often, after one of her courses, cases occurred of people's lives being completely changed. Nothing now appeared more important to these people, than spreading Dr. Montessori's ideas and defending them.

Among such people was Mr. Claude Claremont, B.Sc., A.C. G.I. In 1913 he attended Dr. Montessori's 1st. International Course in Rome. Since then his life has been consecrated to her and to her work.

With his permission we reproduce here the words he wrote in memory of her.

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IN MEMORY OF MONTESSORI

by

Claude A. Claremont, B.Sc.

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I should like, in what follows, to unravel the secret of a great goodness. I shall fail, necessarily, but it is a duty to try. The effort being personal, I shall have difficulty in excluding another personality: my own. For this I must crave the reader's indulgence. The truly great can only be seen through the eyes of others. They reveal themselves but partially; to each according to his powers of apprehension. So it behaves any of us who knew one of these to write what he can. Together we may achieve a picture. Singly we cannot.

Let me start with Dr. Montessori's first Case dei Bambini, or Nursery Schools, for normal children under school age. These are said to have transformed the whole atmosphere of slum districts in Rome, Milan, and later in Naples. I think they must have done this, but my own evidence is indirect. I was asked to speak about them in a slum district of London. It was a

social evening, merely, with games and buns. I had fifteen minutes and saw to my astonishment intellect dawn in faces brutish and apathetic. My hands held aloft the buttoning frames, and sand-paper letters ! The truth is that wherever Montessori spoke (or wherever her work spoke for her) people understood, and to understand is to feel, and look, intelligent. Nothing was too recondite to come apart in her hands. Complexities she broke up, dissected them, and behold order and simplicity replacing complication and confusion. Those about her came alive because nothing happened to discourage them. Hers was the opposite of the cleverness that makes one feel stupid, of the goodness that makes one feel bad, of the energy that makes one feel slothful. Even her way of looking at people was encouraging. Never the penetrating and disconcerting stare nor the sentimental look of over-admiration, but the good-natured gaze of bon rapport conveying honest appreciation of an assumed good-will.

An attitude like this is not to be ignored; it is the basis - a wish to make things easy so that spirits can expand; and educational devices themselves come out of it, for it inspires that humility without which no one could devise them. I was once demonstrating some new ways of teaching chemistry (Montessori inspired ones) to a young army officer from abroad, who seemed to lose interest and to begin looking at me instead, with the most extraordinary intentness; so much so that I asked him the reason for it.

"But you", he said, "are trying to make me understand!"

"Of course. Why not?"

"In my country", he replied, "the professor would not be trying to make me understand. He would be trying to convince me that I could not understand, and that he alone could!"

Here, I reflected, was a young man completely outside the art of education, and grotesque though the illustration is (in our circles) the very enormity of it helps to show something important, which is what that art really is. It is the art of how, and not of what, to teach - an art in which success is to correspond exactly with the needs of a given mind, no matter at what level.

In Montessori's abandonment of a medical career to teach mental defectives (the stepping-stone to all her later work), we saw the acme of perfection in this. And, in her day, it needed as

much moral courage to descend (as people thought) to these depths, as it had cost her previously to become the first Italian woman doctor of medicine. Indeed, her critics took this as proof of their contention:

"Just look!" they said. "Train a woman to medicine and she ends a nurse-maid none-the-less!"

But what Montessori, and her predecessor, Séguin (also a doctor of medicine) knew, was that success at this level is the hardest of all. So, ever it was the same wish - the desire to help - that brought genius first to the asylum and then to the Nursery School, and from this act, which looks like an act of heroic humility, but is really the act of a doctor accepting a challenge, came the immensely more detailed transformation of the junior school now to be seen in Holland - with adumbrations for future work right up to, and through, the university age. To this we must add, in general, the transformed child-adult relationship - so firm a foundation for mental health - and the new child-environment relationship which the world (though understanding it little) now salutes so widely, for by accurately fitting the environment to the child, the latter is permitted to reveal those deeper aptitudes and enthusiasms which were formerly hidden. Personalities come to flower when obstacles are removed, and to avoid the incessant nagging called the correction of mistakes, she went to great lengths, both in the training of her teachers and the devising of self-corrective exercises, in which the child himself notices his error, and tries again, this time avoiding it.

In a student's note-book, I found to my delight the following sentence, which neither I, nor anyone else, had taught her, but which deserves to be blazoned in gold above every teacher's rostrum: "Effort leads to perfection, and the perception of error keeps effort alive".

NEWS ITEMS IN THE MONTESSORI FIELD.

PRESIDENT OF THE A.M.I.:

Of the four Vice-Presidents, Dr. E. Rotten, Switzerland,