



## The shabby brown suede

BY BARBARA EATON

WHEN I met my first family with multiple problems I was not shocked, somewhat to my own surprise. The situation had all the classic circumstances. Dirty nappies all over the place, tiny, only partly-dressed children left in the care of an unwashed young man practically in rags, no food in the house, broken windows and filth. Compared with my own home it looked appalling—and yet, and yet—somehow it was the desperate human need that came across rather than the physical aspects of the environment. Later that day I met the parents. His dull eyes bore no resentment, just a vague lack of interest; her aggression regarding implied criticism of her treatment of the children harboured guilt; the many tired lines on the young face told of infinite weariness. Sympathy and warmth came flooding in on me, but also the big question, where and how best to make contact.

Two aspects of approach struck me as particularly important—one to draw on one's own personal experiences, and the other to recognise that what divides us is far less than the common ground we share.

Anyone with knowledge of camp life, be it internment, concentration or refugee camp any-

where in the world, knows that personal standards can vastly deteriorate in people, sometimes most unexpectedly, shocking even the individual concerned. It is so easy to be fastidiously clean and hygienic in a centrally heated home with running hot water and to condemn those who smell less wholesome. The pump in a cold yard early a.m. makes rather different demands, so does the single cold tap, shared by many on a freezing landing. A council house on a winter's morning, with the occupants on supplementary benefits and no money left for the meter or a hot breakfast, is similarly daunting.

My own experiences in an internment camp in 1940 showed me how lack of security and rejection by society drains individuals of the will to make a contribution in their own community. Once depression sets in, and nothing is done to alleviate the pressure, apathy follows and it is one way of starting the downward spiral of mental and physical regression. A person with several problems in his ordinary surroundings might well be in a similar state. A disposition to weakness in the face of temptation or a 'couldn't care less' lack of involvement, can soon result in a dis-

heartened idler, incapable of keeping any job unless efforts are made by the community to offer imaginative opportunities. Lack of initiative and drive due to insecurity can very rapidly change to withdrawal from the slightest challenge, unless strong support is given and some of the burdens eased.

In this situation, the contribution of older persons, perhaps married with grown-up children, can be particularly useful. Especially so in the case of those who have been forced at times to recognise ugly realities, both in themselves and in society. It seems that we construct collectively a replica of our own unconscious conflicts. Our institutions and priorities, our obsession as a society with status, affirmations and negations reflect accurately our fears, our lack of security and weakness. We severely punish the train robber who threatens the status of property by the magnitude of his theft, or the spy who undermines our national sense of security. But the socially inadequate get a life sentence with no remission, because their crime is to be the mirror of a part of ourselves we do not dare to admit.

There have been many times when I have felt the most worthless and wicked person in the world and I was horrified recently to hear the matron of a residential children's home talking about 'bad stock' in connection with some of the mothers of her charges. I am selecting two of many incidents to illustrate why I personally feel this approach to be wholly misguided and completely lacking in understanding of human motivation and nature.

### **Dilapidated contraption**

When my son was born during the war, consumer goods were in short supply and the few shillings' allowance of a soldier's wife did not go very far towards the baby's needs. A charitable organisation was recommended by kindly well-wishers, where I indelibly blotted my copy-book by criticising a monstrous, dilapidated contraption offered as a pram, and being told 'beggars can't be choosers; some people have to manage with a box on wheels'. I got into debt to buy my own pram, which was easily enough obtainable if one had the money.

One debt soon led to another, increasing anxiety playing havoc with an already tenuous grip on the management of my affairs. Walking along one late, dark evening shortly after, my foot kicked something on the pavement which turned out to be a purse. Some agonising, silent minutes ticked by (I can feel the shabby brown suede now)—the purse disappeared into my pocket—to stay, and I walked briskly on. The first inroads on self-respect and esteem had been well established. At eighteen, this was serious. Years later, I found myself in a

business position of authority and responsibility, where a certain amount of 'oiling of wheels' (money-wise) was common practice. To me, the temptation did not even exist. Honesty by then had become a matter of intellectual conviction, not chance.

After a very few years my teen-age marriage broke down, resulting in my having to give up one of my children, fortuitously recovered through the Courts three years later. No mother who has ever come home to an empty cot, whatever the reasons, type of home or background, can feel anything but overwhelming love and affinity towards a fellow human being in a similar situation. Whether it is 'care' for neglect, cruelty or a broken marriage, the shadows of guilt and despair have a habit of closing in. The people concerned are crying out for our help and understanding, not condemnation.

After many eventful years, I find myself in social work. I wish I could persuade more of those people to join me who have also had to face their own death and disintegration, bit by bit, but who have learnt the true meaning of resurrection. It leaves one with a basis of self-confidence and security that makes it so easy to give.

The professional training is proving a fascinating experience, wholly complementary to empirical knowledge. The equality of human beings in worth and value is becoming increasingly clear; the inequalities of opportunity for growth and development daily more painful and obvious. The family with many difficulties is an expression of our own inability to come to terms with the realities of human nature. The deprived infants are easy to ignore, until they become parents who reject their children. The cot-bound toddler in the bedsitter can't demand a nursery and causes no real nuisance until he starts school. Special schools have long waiting lists of emotionally disturbed and backward children, but until they roam the streets as teen-agers, they attract little attention. Well-meaning institutions turn loose emotionally handicapped young adults to fend for themselves in a society in a society they were never equipped to face. An aggrieved public views with dismay the rising cost of our increasing prison population.

Of course, it is not easy to admit to ourselves that, basically, we are as capable of the meanest as well as the most inspired actions and behaviour, each and every one of us. It takes a lot of courage personally and collectively, but unless we learn to face our true image, we are like Oscar Wilde's Dorian Grey. Our psychiatric hospitals, our problem families, our prisons, our violence and wars are reflections of the hidden aspects of self which, if they remain hidden, may one day destroy us.