

TALKS TO PARENTS AND TEACHERS

BY
HOMER LANE

WITH AN
INTRODUCTION
BY
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Photo by

HOMER LANE

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INTRODUCTION

HOMER TYRRELL LANE was born at Hudson, New Hampshire, on September 22, 1876. He was the second son in a family of three boys and two girls. His father, Samuel Lane, moved to Massachusetts, where he was connected with the railway. His mother was a strict Baptist, and in revolt against her authority Lane became the leader of a "tough" gang of boys in the town, and when about fourteen years old ran away from home. He spent some time in lumber camps in Maine—here he won a reputation with his fists—and eventually reached Southborough, Massachusetts, where he worked as an errand-boy in a grocery store. Later he became clerk and delivery man. He was occupying this position when he married in 1898. There were two children of this marriage. In 1902 Lane married again, his first wife having died eighteen months before.

He always declared that it was the birth of his first child in 1899 that made him turn to educational work. His earliest experience was as a teacher of manual work on the Sloyd method, the fundamental principle of which is the value of working for some useful end which will enlist the interest of the pupil. As a preparation for teaching, Lane went to Boston, through the help of the village doctor, who was his life-long friend and who stood by him both at the death of his first wife in 1901 and many times later.

At Boston, Lane studied at the Sloyd Training School. The course included lectures on psychology at Harvard, and Lane's interest in this subject, and his original views, made him one of the most successful students at the School.

On completing his training, Lane started a workshop in Southborough and taught the boys from the village in the evening. Then he taught for a short time at the Pennsylvania State Penitentiary: this was the beginning of his work among delinquents. From there he was appointed to teach manual work in the public schools of Detroit.

In addition to his teaching, Lane took an active part in settlement work in Detroit, and was the founder of the "Try Square Club," whose members had belonged to a notorious rebel gang of lads known as the Riverside Gang. He also made a systematic study of children's play in the Summer Playgrounds, which were organized by the city to keep children off the streets in the school holidays; and he became Director of the Detroit Playgrounds. At another time he spent a considerable period observing in the babies' ward of a hospital, making a special study of the problems of nursing and weaning and of infants' activities.

He spent the summer of 1906 at a camp run by the Boys' Home and D'Arcampbell association in Detroit, and was then asked to become the Superintendent. To this he agreed, on condition that the home was moved into the country. An old farmhouse was secured, and the colony consisted of about sixty boys from nine to seventeen years of age;

they did the farm-work. Next year the house was burnt down. Lane broke his wrist in rescuing a boy from the fire ; he spent the night finding sleeping accommodation for the boys and driving them to neighbouring farmhouses, paying no attention to his broken wrist till the afternoon of the next day. The doctor who at last set it told him that he would now never have the proper use of it again. As a fact, it healed completely in record time. Again and again Lane overcame physical disability by the constructive power with which he set himself to any creative work on hand.

When the new buildings were completed in 1907 the name of the home was changed to the Ford Republic, in honour of the family which had subscribed largely to the cost of rebuilding and to mark a change in its system of government. The system up till then was described by Lane as having been a benevolent despotism, differing little from that of an ordinary reformatory. But now the community became self-governing, though not to the same extent as the subsequent Little Commonwealth. For at the Ford Republic there was a right of appeal from the "citizens'" court to the supreme court, presided over by the Superintendent, and the decision of this court was final.

Lane won wide recognition for his work at the Ford Republic and did a good deal of lecturing as a result. Among his friends was Thomas Mott Osborne, the author of *Society and Prisons* and the famous governor of Sing Sing Prison. Lane, however, was not satisfied with the Republic. He was

anxious to substitute for the institutional system of one large building a number of cottages each holding a "family" of boys. He did not, however, get the consent of his committee for the change, and in 1911 left the Ford Republic. It was then that he first came over to England, to lecture on his theories of self-government in connection with the proposal to found a self-governing school in Dorset. He returned to America, however, towards the end of the year, and started work as a navvy in a gang which was laying streets and sidewalks in Buffalo. Here his gift for mechanics was so useful that in the summer of 1912 he was put in charge of part of a contract with a large gang of men under him engaged in laying plant for sewage disposal. In that part of the work which was in his charge he abolished all foremen and "clocking-on," and established a record for low prices.

Late in 1912 Lane was invited to come to England again, and shortly afterwards became the Superintendent of the Little Commonwealth, a self-governing reformatory school which had recently been established in Dorsetshire by Mr. George Montagu (the present Lord Sandwich) and his friends. Lane's wife and children followed in 1913. The Little Commonwealth was carried on as a certified reformatory, to which children could be sent by magistrates or Boards of Guardians, until 1918, when it was closed in circumstances which were at the time not fully explained to the public. Two girls, who had run away from the Commonwealth and had been arrested in London in circumstances which made it imperative for them to find some justification for their action,

made a charge of assault against the Superintendent and alleged that this was the cause of their truancy. The Home Office decided to investigate the case, and appointed Mr. J. F. Rawlinson, K.C., then Recorder of Cambridge, to hold an inquiry.¹ The Managing Committee of the Commonwealth welcomed the inquiry, but feared that Mr. Rawlinson's training was not such as to enable him to understand or sympathize with the unconventional methods of the Little Commonwealth. Events proved that their fears were justified. One of the girls who had made the charge against Lane did not appear to substantiate it. The other girl did appear, and her contradictory statements made it clear that her charge was false. Mr. Rawlinson's report was made privately to the Home Secretary and was never even shown to the Managing Committee. The charge was not proved, neither was Lane exonerated. The Home Office threatened to withdraw their certificate from the School if Lane remained as Superintendent; and the Committee, rather than part with Lane, closed the Commonwealth, without publishing any explanation of the reasons. There was much mystification, and Lane was never free after this from considerable suspicion in official quarters.

Lane moved to London, taking with him a number of the Commonwealth children for whom the Committee could not provide, and he made himself from now

¹ For a fuller treatment of these events, including Lane's own narrative of the closing of the Little Commonwealth and a comment on the whole circumstances by the Right Hon. the Earl of Lytton, the reader is referred to a book shortly to be published under the title of *Homer Lane and the Little Commonwealth*, by Miss E. T. Bazeley.

onwards financially responsible for these children. He had no income of his own, though friends helped him through the crisis, and set to work to earn his living at first by lecturing on education and psychology. He was attached for a time as a lecturer to the Australian Expeditionary Force, and in this capacity gave a course of lectures at Cambridge. Gradually he turned from lecturing to personal work as a consulting psychologist, at first chiefly with teachers, for his dominant interest was always in education. His long and careful observation of children and of adolescents had convinced him that many of the ailments and much of the unhappiness of later years are traceable to errors of treatment in childhood, which can subsequently be retrieved. In this work his really remarkable achievements in physical and mental treatment were little known outside the circle of his friends: he never allowed his success to be advertised. Lane was a student, but also a critic, of Freud and of Jung. He belonged to no "school." He was a particularly open-minded and liberal student of his subject, free from dogmatism and working out his practice as he went.

Many men and women suffering from nervous depression and various types of spiritual disorder owed to him the recovery of power over themselves and their work, and renewed happiness in marriage or in social life. Those who have any knowledge of psycho-therapeutics will realize that it is impossible, in many such cases, to give help to people, and especially to those of the opposite sex, without great risk to the helper. In February 1925 Lane was

INTRODUCTION

treating a highly abnormal woman. After refusing various other gifts, he accepted from her as a loan a large sum of money. Her relatives appealed to the police, who found that Lane, who was an American citizen, had failed to register afresh after a change of address. He was arrested under the Aliens Act, refused bail, and sent to Brixton Prison. His rooms were searched, and a number of apparently incriminating letters were discovered addressed to him by abnormal women-patients. Lane had preserved these letters (characteristically in an open file), together with many others, for the purposes of a technical book which he had been intending to write. In dealing with such cases he encouraged from his patients the open expression, in writing if they so preferred, of any morbid broodings, so that the patient, by externalizing these, might be rid of their unconscious influence. His own explanation may suffice: "If your little son asked you to wipe dirt off his face, you would not say, 'I will if it is soot, but not if it is anything really disgusting.'" He was no more to be blamed for receiving such letters than is a surgeon whose patient is sick after an anæsthetic. In the trial at Bow Street in March 1925 the prosecution relied largely on these letters, with a reinforcement of insinuations for which no proof was attempted. The object apparently was to represent him as leading a life which he could not possibly have hidden from a large number of men and women of character with whom he lived on terms of close intimacy. It was unfortunate that the last chapter of the *Little Commonwealth* had been left unwritten by those

concerned ; for the fact that they had issued no public statement at the close made it easier now, though Lane had not been convicted on that occasion of anything, to insinuate that he had been guilty before.

Those who blamed Lane for taking a large sum of money from one of his patients made the mistake of regarding this as his general practice, and were not, perhaps, aware of the many cases which he treated gratis. Throughout his life he was handicapped by want of funds. He was frequently offered money by those who wished in return to dictate his policy or control his work. These offers he always refused. He valued his independence before everything, and he was incapable of being untrue to himself. He helped many who could pay little or nothing for his services, but he never refused contributions from those who could afford to pay and who offered him money without any desire to control its expenditure. Such contributions he spent not on himself—his own standard of living was a simple one—but on the prosecution of his work and in payment of other services which were given gratis. The lavishness of his generosity was the despair of some of his friends who had made considerable personal sacrifices to help him, and his carelessness in business transactions shocked those who had been trained to more methodical habits. As he never expected any return from those to whom he gave what he had to give so he refused to recognize any obligations on his part to those from whom he received. He considered that transactions on a money basis spoiled human relationships, and, in fact, would have liked to

conduct his work on the basis rather of gift than of payment.

It could hardly be expected that such considerations would be appreciated or even explicable in court. Lane, cross-examined at Bow Street, was strangely like Socrates before his Athenian accusers: neither side understood the other's type of mind and emotion. But the sentence—a month's imprisonment with a recommendation to the Home Secretary to deport—could not be justified and was upset on appeal. The actual offence—no other charge was ever brought, apart from innuendoes—was the technical one of non-registration. Everyone knew his address, and the normal penalty in such cases is a small fine. The sentence was passed in spite of overwhelming evidence as to his character given in the witness-box by all sorts and conditions of people.

Lane appealed, and at the London Quarter Sessions in May the sentence of a month's imprisonment was quashed and a nominal fine of two guineas substituted. The recommendation to deport was not cancelled; it was not, however, to be passed on to the Home Secretary for a month, Lane having stated that before that time he would have left England. The understanding which Lane gave to do this was not, it seems, intended by him to have the form which it did actually have; he imagined that the general criticisms of his character were in some way publicly withdrawn, nor was it apparent to him, in the moments following the settlement, that he had done anything which might put him in the position of having seemed to admit himself as "undesirable." He certainly

did mean to leave England in any event, and before the appeal he had openly said so, since conditions had been created which for the time made his work impossible. But he had also before the appeal definitely and explicitly, in a discussion of procedure, rejected the suggestion of any such bargain as was, in fact, made. That the misunderstanding which allowed this bargain did arise was due in part to his obvious weariness of the whole business—he was throughout as impatient of legal puzzles and formalism as in the earlier Home Office inquiry about the Little Commonwealth—and in part to his complete disregard of his own security or personal repute; it had always been an ineradicable part of him to regard these things as irrelevant both to the interest and to the validity of his work. In consequence of this misunderstanding, the witnesses for the defence were not put into the box at all at the appeal. Thus, in spite of the appeal, the real issue as it concerned himself was left suspended in the air; the same thing had happened at the Little Commonwealth inquiry. Throughout he had been with difficulty persuaded to take any serious thought about the lines of his defence.

Lane left for France, intending to write; and that his books died with him is a great part of the loss. He was a man of perfect health, both bodily and mental, and no man was more free of the self-consciousness of worrying about what we think that other people are thinking about ourselves; but there is no doubt that the strain told on him more than was apparent and lowered his powers of resistance.

While at Nice he contracted typhoid and pneumonia. He moved to the American hospital in Paris, where his wife and eldest son joined him. In this hospital he died, after a fortnight more of hard fighting, on September 6, 1925.

Lane's friends had always urged him to write, and, yielding to their persistence, he had proposed two books, one of them on the upbringing of young children and the other on the "re-education" of adults by means of psychological analysis. These he had more than once begun, and a few relics of his attempts remain, but generally he destroyed what he had written. The fact is that he was neither a systematic thinker nor a literary craftsman. He was a genius in understanding and sympathy, but a genius of that type which cannot easily make its methods available for others to use.

But some of those who have observed or enjoyed his gifts of insight into the complexities of personality were unwilling that no record of his labours should remain. Hence this book, consisting in part of Lane's manuscript Lectures of 1919 on *The Self-Determination of Small People*, and, for the rest, based on miscellaneous fragments and on full notes taken by some of those who attended his lectures, since delivered in London to parents and teachers. These notes and remains have been brought into their present shape by Mr. H. H. Symonds and Mr. C. H. C. Osborne, while Lane's work at the Little Commonwealth in Dorset will be described in the separate book above referred to, *Homer Lane and the Little Commonwealth*, by Miss E. T. Bazeley. The

two volumes together form a worthy tribute to a life of singularly fearless and unselfish service.

Lane's life ended in a tragedy. The faults which laid him open to the law's suspicion—misjudgments due to a naïve lack of worldly prudence—have little relevance to our estimate of his character, still less to the permanent value of his contribution to our growing knowledge of the motives which determine conduct and of the right way of handling them. He disliked the term psycho-analysis, preferring "re-education": he saw that the aim of psychological treatment should be, not to take the personality to pieces, but to help the patient to build it up, to analyse only as a step to synthesis, to explain difficulties only to restore the patient to his own control and so liberate him for the task of completing his own cure. In this process he always refused to recognize, indeed he often expressly repudiated, any personal influence of his own. Be that as it may, the many whom he led into new happiness of life and work are not likely to forget their contact with a man who had won his own way to freedom through labour, suffering and love.

ALBERT LIVERPOOL.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	5
By the BISHOP of LIVERPOOL.	

TALKS TO PARENTS AND TEACHERS.

I. INFANCY	19
II. THE AGE OF IMAGINATION	61
III. THE AGE OF SELF-ASSERTION	82
IV. THE AGE OF LOYALTY	103
A NOTE ON CONSCIENCE, MANNERS AND THE SENSE OF INFERIORITY	
	117
A NOTE ON THE UNCONSCIOUS MIND AND OUR IDEAS OF GOD	
	121
A NOTE ON THE "SYNTHESIS" OF THE INSTINCTS	
	130
A NOTE ON TOYS AND PLAY	
	133
A NOTE ON PUNISHMENTS	
	140

THOUGHTS ON THE SELF-DETERMINATION OF SMALL PEOPLE.

I. SELF-GOVERNMENT OR PUNISHMENT	149
II. MISCONCEPTIONS OF POWER	159
III. THE SHAM AUTHORITY AND THE REAL	170
IV. A RELEASE FROM AUTHORITY	179
ADDITIONAL NOTE.—AN ACCOUNT OF THE LITTLE COMMONWEALTH AT EVERSNOT, DORSET	
	188
INDEX	195