

Elly Was a Normal Baby But Then Came 'The Siege'

By HADASSAH F. DAVIS

For the past fifty years parents have had a poor press. Psychiatrists cite case after case showing that "Parents are the enemy." Novelists and playwrights prove that the evil parents do lives after them, while the good is interred long before their bones. "The Siege," written by a mother of four children who also teaches English at a community college, conveys a different message. This account describes the author's efforts to entice her youngest child out of the imprisoning security of infantile psychosis into the perilous freedom of human consciousness and choice. It is not a fairy tale story of success. There are no miraculous transformations; the author offers no magic techniques for change. The developments she describes come by slow and sometimes painful steps. But for these very reasons the book makes fascinating reading for anyone who cares about children's growth, or who wonders about the nature of education.

"The Siege" begins with a picture of Elly as a baby of eighteen months, "a tiny golden child on hands and knees, circling round and round a spot in mysterious, self-absorbed delight. . . . She does not see us at all. . . .

One speaks to her loudly or softly. There is no response." The Parks had begun to realize that they thought of her as a "difficult baby," but they were not seriously worried. In most ways Elly seemed healthy and happy. She was strong and well coordinated in the activities she undertook and played contentedly in her crib. She was never mischievous when crawling about the house. No one had to worry about her spilling soap powder all over the floor or sampling the taste of furniture polish. She didn't walk yet, but late walking was something of a family characteristic. She didn't talk at all, but "every parent of a slow talker knows that Einstein didn't talk until he was four." Her lack of initiative, (she never climbed after objects or pointed at them), seemed strange; her unresponsiveness, (except at moments of direct physical contact she seemed unaware of people's presence) was troubling. But the Parks had learned from the growth of their other children that "events usually render worries irrelevant, and that worry

itself can harm a child more than most of the conditions one worries about."

However a few months later the doctor to whom Elly was taken for vaccination said, "If you're not worried, I am." He thought there might be some physiological deficiency; but the hospital tests were negative. Elly was sent home with the comment that she was "still within the curve of normal development." As the next months passed, however, Elly fell further and further behind normal expectations; she learned to walk easily enough, but her speech did not improve, and she gave no indication of understanding anything that was said to her. When she was three the staff of the Massachusetts General Hospital found that she was physically healthy in every way that medical techniques could test. The distinguished pediatrician there offered a somewhat tentative diagnosis of "autism," with the recommendation: "Take her home . . . do what you've been doing . . . give her plenty of affection . . . let me know how you get along."

Six months later the psychiatric center's recommendations, based on exhaustive interviews with Elly and her parents, avoided the term "autism," but offered no more enlightening insight into the nature of Elly's illness, or the prospects for cure. The Parks had planned to spend the next year in England, and the psychiatrist advised them to proceed with their plans. He thought that Elly needed psychiatry, but there was no guarantee that a year's work would produce any significant change. In England the Parks found professional help which the author describes with warm affection, and since their return to America they have made use of professional help which is gratefully acknowledged. Nevertheless the current state of knowledge with regard to Elly's illness has made professional help necessary to her development. The central factor in her growth has been the siege which her parents mounted as soon as they recognized her withdrawal, and in which they have persisted for six and a half years. (Elly is about eight years old at the end of the book.)

In a series of chapters, ("Willed Weakness," "Willed Blindness," "Willed Deafness," "Willed Isolation"), Clara Park defines the citadel to which Elly had retreated,

and describes at the same time, her own efforts to breach those imprisoning walls. She shows by what infinitesimally tiny steps Elly moved toward acknowledging her own capacity for action. She tells how she taught Elly to see pictures by relating the visual image to physical experience. She describes the slow growth of Elly's comprehension and the still slower growth of her vocabulary. She describes Elly's ever so gradual acknowledgement of the existence of other people. As we watch Elly's growth in capacity and her mother's increasing skill and insight, we become aware that we are seeing a slow motion study of human relationship in which some developments which must usually be inferred, since they pass too quickly to be seen, are spelled out at length, and in which anomalies of growth occur in ways similar to but greater than those observed in "normal" development.

Later chapters follow Elly's development as she moved out into a world which included nursery groups, kindergarten, and the beginnings of formal learning. Here we see how well she grasped arithmetical and spatial relationships, and at the same time how her need for exactness blocked comprehension of the most ordinary human and temporal concepts. Elly learned fixed and conventional relationships without any difficulty, the names and shapes of geometric figures, the correspondence between written symbols and spoken words, the procession of week days, all were easy. But the story of the Three Bears, the notions of "tomorrow," or "yesterday," the correspondence involved in greeting her mother, (or anyone else), remained beyond her.

"The Siege" will be poignantly interesting to parents faced with similar problems. It will be helpful to all those (psychiatrists, pediatricians, teachers, social workers), who are professionally concerned with mental illness in children. It is, however, more than a handbook of useful techniques, or a layman's guide to infantile psychosis. Clara Park has written a lucid, and moving, account of a crucial human experience. She describes a typical situation; and within it she presents a model of all parental and educative effort.

The Siege, by Clara Claiborne Park, 279 pages, Harcourt, Brace, and World, \$6.75.