

IN DEFENSE OF SHYNESS

It is surely discreditable, under the age of 30, not to be shy. Self assurance in the young betokens a lack of sensibility: the boy or girl who is not shy at 22 will at 42 be a bore.

No, let us educate the younger generation to be shy in and out of season: to edge behind the furniture: to say spasmodic and ill-digested things: to twist their feet round the protective feet of sofas: to feel that their hands belong to someone else — that they are objects, which they long to put down on some table away from themselves.

For shyness is the protective fluid within which our personalities are able to develop into natural shapes. Without this fluid the character becomes merely standardized or imitative: it is within the tender velvet sheath of shyness that the full flower of idiosyncrasy is nurtured: it is from this sheath alone that it can eventually unfurl itself, colored and undamaged. Let the shy

understand, therefore, that their disability is not merely an inconvenience but also a privilege.

I do not think that shyness can be kept within bounds by any ethical arguments. I used to tell myself, for instance, at those moments outside the doorways of the great when shyness becomes a laughing monster with its fangs already gaping at one's heart,— I used to tell myself that I was as good, as powerful as rich, as beautiful as any of those I was about to meet. This was not a good system. It made me pert. I would bounce into the room gaily, as if I were the Marquis de Soveral; be somewhat impudent to my hostess, cut my host dead, show undue familiarity towards the distinguished author, and fling myself into an armchair. The chair would recede at this impact and upset a little table on which were displayed a bottle of smelling salts, a little silver cart from Rome, a Persian pen-box,

and a bowl of anemones. These objects would rattle loudly to the floor, and with them would tumble my asseritiveness.

Such deductive systems invariably fail. Fatal also is the reverse process of behaving like the worm one feels. "Remember," I have said to myself on giving my hat and coat to the footman, "remember that you are a worm upon this earth. These people have only asked you because they met your aunt at St. Jean de Luz. They do not wish to see you, still less do they wish to hear you speak. You may say good evening to your hostess, and then you must retreat behind the sofa. If addressed, you will reply with modesty and politeness. If not addressed, you will not speak at all." Things do not work out that way. The place behind the sofa is occupied by an easel: and then one falls over the dog. No, — shyness must be controlled by more scientific methods.

In the first place, you must diagnose the type of shyness from which you suffer. There are two main divisions of the disease, the physical

and the mental type. The physical type are shy about their limbs, — their arms and legs make jerky movements which cause breakages and embarrassment. The mental type are shy about what they say or where they look. It is the latter who are most to be pitied. For whereas the physical sufferer can generally, by using great circumspection, avoid the worst consequences of his affliction, the mental type is not released until he finds him or herself alone again in the motor, homeward bound. It is upon the latter type that I desire to concentrate.

The first rule is to make it perfectly clear to one's parents before arriving at the party that one is to remain unnoticed. One's mother should not be allowed to make gestures at us — down the table — of encouragement and love. One's father should be forbidden to confide to the hostess that this is the first time that you have worn an evening suit or a low necked dress, — should be forbidden to cast sly paternal glances at one, or to observe whether one does, or does not, enjoy one-

self. One must be left alone with one's shyness.

The second rule is to determine from the outset that one does not desire to shine either socially or intellectually. Nor should one attempt to appear older than one actually is. These things do not carry conviction. You will find yourself, if you give way to these ambitions, slipping into phrases which are not your own phrases and of which, once they have escaped the barrier of your lips, you will feel ashamed. You may be calling, for instance, upon the wife of a neighbor: you will find her sitting on the veranda in a green deck chair: if you are wise, you will have the modesty to say merely "How are you, Mrs. Simpson?"; but if you are unwise, and wish to appear at your ease, you will exclaim "Please don't get up!" Having said this, you will reflect that Mrs. Simpson had no idea of getting out of her deck chair for such a worm as you. Do not, therefore, adopt or even adapt the phrases of your elders. Above all do not break into conversations. It may well be that the Pri-

mavera is a picture painted, not by Cimabue, but by Botticelli. But it is not for you, when others attribute the painting to an earlier artist, either to interfere or to correct. A slight pursing of the lips is all that you may allow yourself. The only justification for being shy is to be shy to all the people all the time. You must avoid being pert to governesses and polite to bishops. But if you are always shy, people will end by imagining that you have a modest nature: and that, since it will flatter their own self-esteem, will make you extremely popular. Only when you have become popular can you afford to be interesting, intelligent, or impressive. It is a great mistake to endeavor to awaken admiration before you have stilled envy, and it is only when people have started by ignoring the young that they end by liking the young. It may be a comfort to you therefore to consider that it is an excellent thing, at first, to be regarded as being of no importance. — *By Harold Nicolson, condensed from Vanity Fair (September, '30).*