11 January 1951

Mother comments upon some of the qualities enumerated in her article “What a Child Should Always Remember” (On Education).

“To be modest”

This is to take oneself at one’s true worth.

Generally people pass from an excessive appreciation of their personal value to an equally excessive discouragement. One day they say, “I am wonderful”, and the next day, “Oh! I am good for nothing, I can do nothing.” That is like a pendulum, isn’t it? There is nothing more difficult than knowing exactly what one is; one must neither overrate oneself nor depreciate oneself, but understand one’s limits and know how to advance towards the ideal set before oneself. There are people who see in a big way and immediately imagine they can do everything. There are petty officers, for example, who imagine themselves capable of winning all the battles of the world, and small people who think they surpass everybody in the world. On the other hand, I have known some people who had abilities but who spent their time thinking, “I am good for nothing.” Generally the two extremes are found in the same person. But to find someone who knows exactly where he stands and exactly where he can go, is very rare. We have avoided speaking of vanity because we expect that you won’t be filled with vanity as soon as you score a success.

Just imagine, there are plants which are vain! I am speaking of plants one grows for oneself. If one pays them compliments, by words or by feelings, if one admires them, well, they hold up their head — with vanity! It is the same with animals. I am going to tell you a short amusing story.
Questions and Answers

In Paris there is a garden called “The Garden of Plants”: there are animals there also, as well as plants. They had just received a magnificent lion. It was of course in a cage. And it was furious. There was a door in the cage behind which it could hide. And it would hide itself just when the visitors came to see it! I saw that and one day I went up to the cage and began speaking to it (animals are very sensitive to spoken language, they really listen). I began speaking softly to my lion, I said to it, “Oh! How handsome you are, what a pity that you are hiding yourself like this, how much we would like to see you....” Well, it listened. Then, little by little, it looked at me askance, slowly stretched its neck to see me better; later it brought out its paw and, finally, put the tip of its nose against the bars as if saying, “At last, here’s someone who understands me!”

“To be generous”

I shall not speak here of material generosity which naturally consists in giving others what one has. But even this virtue is not very widespread, for as soon as one becomes rich one thinks more often of keeping one’s wealth than of giving it away. The more men possess, the less are they generous.

I want to speak of moral generosity. To feel happy, for example, when a comrade is successful. An act of courage, of unselfishness, a fine sacrifice have a beauty in them which gives you joy. It may be said that moral generosity consists in being able to recognise the true worth and superiority of others.