

IS THE FIRST BORN CHILD INFERIOR TO ITS BROTHERS?

Sir Francis Galton Says It Is and Upsets English Society, Especially Those Interested in the House of Lords.

THE eldest born are, as a rule, inferior in natural gifts to the younger born."

Are they? The question as to the mental and physical abilities of the eldest son, thus discredited by Sir Francis Galton, founder of the science of eugenics, has been stirring titled, lay, and scientific circles in England quite considerably of late. Sir Francis, who has spilled the fat in the fire of English society, stated in a letter to The London Times that the House of Lords might be stronger and more efficient if primogeniture, the exclusive right of inheritance vested in the eldest son, were abolished.

"Late researches," wrote Sir Francis, "have shown that the eldest born are, as a rule, inferior to the younger born in a small but significant way. The claims of heredity would be best satisfied if all the sons of peers were equally eligible to the peerage, and a selection made among them."

Naturally this was dropping a bombshell into one of England's most ancient fetiches. Naturally it excited comment. At present the discussion is merrily waging for and against the eldest born, who has suddenly found himself in the position of one who is suspected of having incipient tuberculosis, insanity, and other dreadful things.

It was Lord Rosebery who really started the discussion. In that memorable reform address of his before the House of Lords last month, he practically stated that the higher house was degenerating, partly because, as he claimed, the eldest sons, who inherited the right to the peerage, were usually failures, and were not as competent as younger brothers to manage the affairs of the nation.

"Hereditary tenure," said Lord Rosebery, "was no doubt very useful for feudal purposes, but I think that as a legislative engine it is open to grave objection, and that it has outlived its usefulness. It is the part of our constitution which is most objectionable to the country. Suppose a House composed of Shakespeare, Bacon, Newton, and Burke. Its critics would at once say that these are men of high and exalted genius, but how are we to insure that their successors will inherit their genius with their names?"

And from these remarks, merely intended by Lord Rosebery to emphasize the necessity for reform of the House of Lords, arose the question of the capabilities of the eldest son as compared with those of the later-born. Also Lord Rosebery's remarks stirred speculation as to how often the genius of the father is transferred to the son, and in how many cases, if any, to the eldest son.

Sir Francis Galton's later statement of his own belief, from a study of eugenics and hereditary genius, upon which he is considered an expert, was at once supported by other men eminent in the study of primogeniture. Dr. David Heron of the Galton Laboratory for National Eugenics endorsed the view that the eldest son is usually inferior to the later-born. Karl Pearson of the Eugenics Laboratory of the University College, London, went further and expressed some interesting views of his own on the subject.

"I think there is no doubt," said Prof. Pearson, "that the first two children of

a family are slightly more liable to certain defects than the later-born members. Of a hundred first-born, a hundred second-born, a hundred third-born, and so on individuals—irrespective of sex—the first two sets will have rather more, the third and other sets rather less, than the average percentages of tuberculosis, insanity, albinism, and criminality.

"The differences are very small, but they certainly exist; and I have tried the problem in many ways, to avoid the pitfalls so prevalent in statistics. For aught I can say the eldest-born may have more ability. I have not seen an adequate investigation of this point. On the other hand, the elder-born appear to have a slightly longer length of life.

"It is conceivable that the maternal neurovitate may be the source of certain nervous troubles in the eldest-born; or, when we come to deal with the population as a whole, the eldest-born may more frequently be born when the parents are too young. I give no dogmatic explanation, but, for the characters mentioned, I think the fact is real.

"The inheritance of ability is so marked, however," said Prof. Pearson, "that there is every reason to suppose that a man who has won his way by pure ability will, if wisely mated, be the father of children above the average."

In the matter of the House of Lords, which is supposed to be degenerating on account of the rigid rule of inheritance by the eldest son, Prof. Pearson merely said that it was not so much the hereditary principle—that ability breeds ability—but the inflexibility of the rule which pays no attention to the application or non-application of the principle in the individual case.

"But, returning to the main question," said the Professor of Eugenics, "we find the neurotic, the insane, the tuberculous, and the albino the more frequent among the elder-born. Dr. Goring's results for criminality show the same law.

"The result of this law is rather remarkable. It means that if you reduce the size of the family you will tend to decrease the relative proportion of the mentally and physically sound in the community. You will not upset this conclusion in the least, if, as I suspect, the extraordinarily able man, the genius, is among the eldest born."

This last remark stirs the question to further issue. It may be that Prof. Pearson himself does not class the "extraordinarily able man, the genius" among the normal class. This, however, is a question which has been argued and never settled, as to the affinity of genius and insanity.

It is interesting, however, to make an offhand list of great men—normally great and abnormal geniuses—and look into the matter of their birth, or order of birth. The Sunday Times struck off a list of about a dozen famous names with no regard to precedence or immediate memory of the circumstances of birth. An investigation of the birth circumstances of persons named showed that nearly all came from the middle rung of the family ladder.

George Washington, for instance—and he may be taken as a type of the very normal great man, free from the idiosyncrasies usually attributed to genius—was the fifth child by his father, Augustine Wash-

ington, although he was the first-born son of Augustine Washington's second wife, Mary Ball.

Poe, on the other hand, a type of the erratic genius, was the second son of his Thesplan parents. In his case, however, prenatal influences suggest that it would be unfair to the argument to draw any conclusions such as Prof. Pearson suggested with regard to the first and second born.

But the list of those who were far from the beginning of the family makes the theory of those who have studied eugenics, and decided against the eldest son rather convincing.

Benjamin Franklin, for instance, was the seventeenth child of his father and the tenth of his mother, his father's second wife. The elder Pitt, Earl of Chatham, was a younger son, while the younger William was Chatham's second son. Thomas Jefferson was a third child. Abraham Lincoln was a second child, though an eldest son. The fact that Lincoln's father was the youngest son of a family of men is worth considering, however.

Goethe was one of the random list, and about him there could be no manner of

doubt. Goethe was an eldest and only son. He was also an only child.

Another genius who was an only son—therefore the eldest—was Alexander Hamilton. But he was not an only child. His mother had previously borne a daughter by the much-hated Swede husband whom she left for Hamilton's father. His genius, however, might be attributed to prenatal influences, and is often so attributed by those who know and appreciate the history of the beautiful character who gave birth to the brilliant West Indian.

It was Sir Henry Blake who raised the side issue of where the eldest son stood when he was the youngest child, the previous arrivals in the family having been all girls! A New York physician, discussing the subject the other day, put aside Sir Henry's side-issue as trivial and puerile.

"It doesn't matter how many girls there are in a family, the first son is a very different proposition to the mother. There is an emotional and sentimental idea about that first son which is worth considering. If parental influences are to be considered at all."

In that case William Shakespeare might

be considered an example of an eldest son about whose mental abilities—so abnormally normal—there can be no manner of doubt. But he was not a first child. It is held that he was the third child of John and Mary Shakespeare of Stratford.

Napoleon may have been an eldest son, but the point does not seem to be settled. It is a matter of doubt as to whether Joseph Bonaparte was not born before his brother, or, rather, there is doubt thrown upon the common acceptance of Joseph as an elder brother of Napoleon. Some historians believe that Napoleon, christened Napolione, was born before Joseph. However, Napoleon was at least second, and within the first and second classes which Prof. Pearson claims are likely to be less normal than the children born thereafter. The question remains, also, as to how much of Napoleon's ability was normal.

Against that doubt is the case of Lord Nelson, the hero of Trafalgar, as normal, courageous and clear-headed a man as ever lived. He was the younger son of an English clergyman, the Rev. Edmund Nelson.

Thus, in an off-hand list of twelve famous persons, it would seem that but

one was indubitably an eldest son. Readers of THE SUNDAY TIMES might interest themselves indefinitely looking up the circumstances of birth around scores of famous men, and they would no doubt come to the conclusion that, whatever the reason, eldest sons do not figure largely in the world's Hall of Fame.

This fact, elucidated by disciples and exponents of eugenics in Europe, has been something in the nature of a shock to society, which has ever pinned its faith on the eldest son, although the habits of this same eldest son have ever been a theme of the cheap novelist.

"Popular opinion," said Dr. David Heron of the Eugenics Laboratory, "is always wrong in these matters. The first-born is always more likely to be insane, tuberculous, or criminally inclined than the others. Therefore the tendency to diminish the size of the family only increases the average number of such individuals (eldest sons) in the community."

From which it should be inferred that race suicide is not the solution of the problem of the eldest son. Ireland's contribution to the discussion would probably be that the solution lay in not having an eldest son! Scotland long ago decided one question with a quotation from Robert Burns, who held that Adam, humanity's "eldest son," was really a very inferior creature compared with the second child of earth—Eve:

"His 'prentice han' He tried on man, An' then He made a lassie—O!"

Several New York physicians, among them specialists in children, were interviewed in the matter of the eldest son and his alleged shortcomings. Not one of the physicians would agree to have his name quoted. As one humorously remarked:

"You must bear in mind that in most of the families we attend there is an eldest son. You would not have us libel our patients, would you?"

"I have followed the course of this discussion," said an eminent practitioner, "and have read nothing that has in any way changed previously formed opinions on the subject of the eldest born."

"While there is no reason in the world why an eldest born should be in any way inferior to children born later, it seems to be a fact that many eldest children are not as well equipped in later years.

"The reason for this I would attribute not so much to any prenatal influences—in which I am no great believer—but rather to the disadvantages of having been the first child born to the parents.

"In the upbringing of children a mother and father are novices at one time, even if some mothers and fathers are not novices all the time.

"Take the case of the first child, whether it be an eldest son or an eldest daughter—and it is bound to be one of them—the mother is inexperienced and full of theories which are generally all wrong. Result? The child suffers. A further result to the advantage of the children born thereafter, is that they get the benefit of the experience a mother learned from mistakes made in the upbringing of the first child."

"But supposing the eldest son is born as the fifth or sixth member of the family, all his predecessors having been girls?"

was asked. "It is stated that the eldest son is usually defective."

"This may be fact, and a similar argument might be applied. About a first son, no matter how many girls may have preceded him in the family, there is a sentiment. The eldest son is always looked for. He is usually spoiled because he is the first son.

"Besides that, the best upbringing a boy can get is one with cuffs and kicks in it, figuratively speaking, and one that has boy associations.

"You must realize that the first son—the eldest son—is usually a lonely little fellow. He has no brothers of his age to play with. If he is also a first child he is particularly lonely, and if he is an only child of his parents he is usually treated as if he were made of glass. The result often is that he grows up effeminate or over-sensitive, and unable to stand on a level with the rest of the masculine world when he comes in contact with it.

"Where he is the younger child or the eldest son in a family of girls, he is likely to grow up even more effeminate in his viewpoint and manner.

"Now what about the younger brothers—the younger sons? Their parents having benefited by their mistakes with the eldest son, the aftercomers get a different training. All the mistakes of non-vitiate motherhood are past, and common sense has taken the place of theory and emotional sentiment.

"I think it very likely that the younger brother is liable to be the best-trained, best-equipped person to uphold the family tradition and wealth. It has nothing to do with birth, only with upbringing."

Another physician, a well-known obstetrician, had a very different view of the matter.

"Prenatal physical influence has sometimes much to do with the matter," he said. "You must remember that first maternity is a much more serious matter than are later events of the kind—to the mother. Also there is a great deal of marvel, emotionalism, and physical innovation in connection with the birth of a first child. Should it be a son, it stands to reason that the son will be affected in some degree, more or less.

"I do not believe, however, that there is any significant difference between the first child and later children, save as in cases where the child inherits certain qualities from the mother or the father, or from some near ancestor. Heredity is a variable thing, but it is not more pronounced in its gifts to, or afflictions upon, the first or the last born.

"It is an interesting fact, however, that few great men—or what are popularly called great men—appear to have been first-born sons. It is a matter upon which you can only build theories."

When one has built these theories, however, and turns to the consideration of greatness in connection with the order of birth, it is to note with some respect for such theories that the more abnormal forms of greatness, or genius, seem to occur among first and second sons—such as Goethe, Poe, Napoleon, and Hamilton—while the more normal forms of high ability occur lower down in the family, as in the cases of Washington, Franklin, and Nelson.