

“Some Inf'mation For Mother”



How One Man Answered
the Questions of a Child
About Reproduction



By JOHN PALMER GAVIT
Managing Editor of The New York Evening Post



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“Some Inf’mation for Mother”



IT was evident to the Iconoclast as he came up from the lake with his big string of fish and seated himself upon the steps of the veranda, that he had interrupted a conversation out of the ordinary. Nobody noticed his highly satisfactory catch. The Kindergarten rose as if about to leave, but sat down again. There was a space of somewhat embarrassed silence. Then the Professor, in his most impressive tone, resumed:

“Ignorance undoubtedly is the main, though by no means the only, root of the trouble. Every child should be taught at least the rudiments of the truth about himself or herself; yet in a way so gentle, so gradual, and so tactful that there may be no shock; no rude violation of its natural reserve and delicacy.”

“For my part,” said the Neighbor, flushed with the consciousness of trespassing upon

ground usually forbidden, "I am quite willing to give my little boy this information, but I do not know when, or in what language. I know nothing of medicine." Of course, she meant physiology.

"Oh, but you know about the flowers!" broke in the Kindergartner, in that tone that kindergartners use. "The beautiful story of the fertilization of the blossoms! The bees—"

"No, I don't. And besides, the fertilization, as you call it, that I want to tell him about isn't done by bees."

"I never could understand," interposed the Iconoclast, "why there should be all this intense and even hysterical 'delicacy' about the teaching of sex truth to children. You tell your boys and girls about their teeth and ears and eyes; you make no secret of their digestion, or of the operation of heart and lungs. You even teach these things to them together in school. But—ye gods and little fishes!—the minute you come to these most important functions of all, you stick your heads in the sand like ostriches, and act as if it were something to be ashamed of. If I had my way—"

"Surely," gasped the Neighbor, "you would not teach such things in public!"

"Well, I don't know. As far as I am con-

cerned, I would teach about sex just as I would teach about chemistry, or spelling. But I understand well enough that I am a barbarian. So I take it from your own point of view, and say that I don't care when or how you teach your little boy or your little girl about this thing, if you only tell it frankly—the plain, ordinary truth, in a plain, ordinary and perfectly shameless way.”

“Yes, but the when and the how are everything,” protested the Neighbor.

“When the child is old enough to ask, he's old enough to have an honest answer.”

“You must conserve the innate delicacy of the child,” insisted the Professor.

“I told my little girl,” said the Professor's wife, who thus far had been silent, “that this subject must be a secret, a beautiful secret, between us, and that she must never speak of it to any one but me.”

“And you told her—”

“All that I thought good for her. I told her in an allegorical way, about the flowers, and the pollen, and the bees, and how the seeds formed.”

“Beautiful!” softly exclaimed the Kindergarten.

“How did she take it?” the Neighbor asked.

"She seemed interested, and asked if babies came from bees."

"To which you replied—"

"I promised to tell her more when she was older."

"And meanwhile she is to keep the story of the flowers and the bees and the pollen as a 'beautiful secret' between herself and you?" The Iconoclast's voice trembled with some suppressed emotion.

"Yes, I prefer that she should not talk about these matters with anybody but her mother."

The Iconoclast rose with a sigh, saying:

"Well, I've got to clean these fish or you won't have anything for dinner."



AT THE back of the house was the big stump of a tree, with a wide board across the top, upon which it was the custom to clean the fish of which the lake furnished an inexhaustible supply. He laid upon it one of the largest, felt the edge of his knife with his thumb, and leaned over to the task.

"What are you doing?" The Professor's little girl ran across the sand to see.

"Cleaning these fish for your dinner, Princess."

"May I watch?"

“Certainly, if you’ll keep your fingers out of the way of this sharp knife.”

The fish lay open and flat, and the knife-point was lifting a great mass of yellow-pink roe.

“What’s that?”

“That is called roe; it’s made up of thousands of eggs.”

“Eggs! How funny! Do fish lay eggs?”

“Oh, yes, indeed. All animals—” the Iconoclast checked himself.

“Where do they lay ’em?”

“In different places, and different ways. Some fish even make nests; I’ve seen them. But most fish, I think, go up into the shallow water of streams, and lay their eggs on the pebbles of the bottom.”

“Do they sit on them, like a hen? How can they—such a lot of them?”

“No, the eggs just lie there in the water until they hatch. The mother-fish doesn’t need to keep them warm, as birds do. She just goes on about whatever business she has.”

“And never cares what happens to her eggs?”

“I don’t think she worries much about them.”

Another fish was slit open and laid upon the board.

“Oh, what’s that—that white thing? That isn’t eggs, like the other, is it? It’s about the same shape and size.”

THE Iconoclast stood up and reasoned with himself. How far was he at liberty to go in answering these simple questions? Was it his business to abash this eager curiosity?

“No,” he said at last, “that is not eggs. That is what is called milt.”

“What’s it for?”

“Well, you see, this is a father-fish. The eggs have to have this milt put on them, or they won’t hatch. So after the mother-fish lays the eggs on the pebbles at the bottom of the stream, the father-fish comes along, and spreads this milt through the water over the eggs.”

“How does he know where to find them?”

“I don’t know. That is one of the secrets that the fish keep to themselves. Anyway, the father-fish seems to know where to look for them.”

“S’posin’ he didn’t want to lay the milt on the eggs, or put it somewhere else. Then there

wouldn't be any little fish hatched out, would there?"

"No, there wouldn't. The eggs would just lie there and die. But the father-fish somehow seems to like to do it."

"I s'pose he thinks of the cunning little fish that will hatch out if he does his part. And then he goes away with the mother-fish and they decide what to name their children."

"Very likely," laughed the Iconoclast.

The little girl was silent for a time, watching the deft knife at its dissection; speaking only to identify the father-fish and mother-fish as they came in turn, and laying them side by side in couples.

"I s'pose there are father-birds and mother-birds?"

"Oh, yes."

"Do the father-birds have milt too?"

The Iconoclast straightened up and rubbed the hinge in his back. Cleaning fish is weary work, when you have to stoop so far. He looked away at the wooded hills across the lake.

"I asked you a question. It isn't polite not to answer. Do father-birds have milt?"

He looked down into the big, clear eyes of the eager little face under the blowing curls.

"Yes, father-birds have milt."

“And after the mother-bird lays her eggs in the nest, she goes away and lets the father-bird come in to put the milt on them. Of course, if he didn’t, the eggs wouldn’t hatch.” She said this with an air of conviction.

Then the Iconoclast decided something once for all; stooped over the fish-cleaning again, and said:

“It isn’t quite like that with birds. The father-bird puts the milt on the egg before the mother-bird lays it.”

“But I don’t see—oh, do you mean while it is in the mother-bird’s body?”

“Just so.”

She was thoughtful for a moment. From the corner of his eye he could see that her brow was knit. Here was a mechanical problem. He wondered how he would put it.

“Well, that explains something!” she cried at last. “I do believe I’ve seen them doing it. Do you know, I never dreamed of it. I thought they were always fighting.”

“They were not fighting.”

The little girl was thinking again. Presently she asked:

“Did you ever see a cat’s egg?”

“No, I can’t say I ever did.”

“I’ve always wondered about that. I asked

my mother and she said cats were very secret about their eggs."

"Oh, she said that, did she?"

"Yes, and she said I mustn't ask her any more about it. You don't mind my asking you, do you? I'm really very much int'ested."

"Not at all. I'm glad to tell you anything I know."

"Well, then, tell me this: Where do cats lay their eggs? I'd like awfully to see a cat's egg."

"You're not likely to see one. In the first place, it would be very tiny—too small to see without a microscope, and—"

"But a kitten isn't so very tiny, and I've seen them lots of times, just brand-new, fresh-hatched."

"Ah, but you didn't see the kitten fresh-hatched. The cat's egg never leaves the mother-cat's body at all. The nest where the kitten hatches out is inside of the mother-cat."

THE child's eyes were wide with wonder. "Then the teeny-weeny little new-hatched kitten just stays there in the mother till it's big enough to be let out?"

"Exactly."

"Isn't that lovely?"

The Iconoclast is regarded as a hardened person; but he had not found voice when she added:

"I see now why the mother-cat is so fond of her kitten—she's been it's nest so long!"

"I expect that's one of the reasons."

"Of course, the mother-fish wouldn't care so much; there are so many of hers, and she just leaves them any old way and swims off. Maybe she forgets where she put 'em. The mother-bird cares more, I s'pose, because she's been sitting on the eggs. But there are two, three, four, five kittens sometimes. Our cat had six, once. Are they all in there at once in the nice, warm, cosy mother-nest?"

"Yes, all in there together."

"How can she tell when they're big enough to be let out?"

"That's a thing nobody seems to know—except the mother-cat. She knows when the right time comes."

"I guess they must get pretty heavy. They do let them out too soon, sometimes; the ones I've seen didn't have their eyes open yet. I should think she would keep them till they could see and walk around."

"They never have their eyes open when they are born."

“So that’s what we call being born! It’s just being let out of the mother-nest?”

“That is exactly what it is.”

“And is it just the same with dogs, and little calves, and horses, and elephants, and—”

“Just the same.”

Silence again. Then:

“But there is one thing I don’t exactly understand. After little birds hatch, the mother-bird brings them worms and things. How do the little kittens and elephants be fed in the mother-nest before they are born?”

“While they are in there they are fed from the mother’s own body.”

“No wonder she loves them!” cried the little girl. “Of course, she knows they’re in there?”

“Oh, yes, she—”

“Why, yes, she must. She’d remember when the eggs were fixed so they’d hatch. Of course; that was a foolish question. And they feed from their mother after they are born, too; I’ve seen them—all the cunning little kittens, nursing in a row.”

“Yes, that is one of the differences in animals. The little fishes have to hustle for themselves right away after they are hatched. And the little birds do not nurse; the mother-bird, and

the father-bird, too, usually, bring them food in their bills, and they stay in the nest until they get their feathers and their wings are strong enough to fly.

“But all the warm-blooded animals bring forth their little ones like the cat, and nurse them until they are able to be weaned, as it is called; that is, to eat something besides the mother’s milk.”

“Weaned? Why, they wean babies—I heard my mother say so. Is that what it means?”

“That is what it means.”

“But I thought babies got their milk from bottles! I know I certainly did.”

“Sometimes that is necessary; but most human mothers nurse their babies, when they are able to, just as cats do.”

“And do babies come from eggs, and hatch out in the mother-nest, like the warm-blooded animals?”

“They do. Men and women and children are warm-blooded animals. The baby stays in the mother-nest until the time comes for it to be born, just as the kitten does.”

“Isn’t that beautiful? Now, why didn’t my mother tell me that when I asked her? She said it was a terrible secret, and that I mustn’t talk about it to anybody else but her, and then

she told me about flowers and pollen and bees, and I got all mixed up. I couldn't see what bees had to do with babies—except to sting 'em."

"They have nothing to do with babies, as you say," the Iconoclast said, "but a great deal to do with flowers. If you will just remember that the pollen that the bees carry from one blossom to another is for exactly the same purpose as the milt of the father-fish, you will understand better."

"Do you mean that the flower-seeds wouldn't grow without the pollen that the bee brings?"

"That is it, Princess."

The little girl's brow was knit again, and there was real trouble in her voice as she said:

"It seems funny to me that my mother didn't know how babies come. She certainly had me!"

Suddenly she started away toward the house, saying:

"I thank you very much. You'll have to 'xcuse me, now; I've simply *got* to give my mother some inf'mation!"

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