

Casual Impressions of Colonial Life ... and Character ...

It appears that among the various wonders which it has been the lot of this age to discover, the real, genuine, human child takes rank. At least we lay to our souls the flattering unctious that it remained for us to accept and respond to the genuine significance of the child's entity. It was left for us to interpret him to himself, by means of a literature which is all his own. Ours it is to equip him with an education, which to a large extent he treats as the boy David treated the unwieldy mail from Saul's armoury, flinging almost the whole of it aside when he goes forth to the world's fight. Ours, too, is the crowning merit of beginning to ascertain the extent of his capacity for the possession of personal effects, and this is the point to which we shall presently come.

The question of education (one is speaking, of course, of one's own colony) is a question of such obvious consequence that it is never really off the carpet, and would require separate treatment.

With regard to the evolution of a child's literature (and now we are on a cosmopolitan question), we thankfully acknowledge our indebtedness to the writers of recent years. Whatever decadence has overtaken the literature of the past decade, it has and shall forever retain the glory of having tenderly and sympathetically re-echoed the laughter of childhood. The echo has often been at fault, the treatment in some hands crude; for a child is one of the first and most difficult subjects to treat, yet much has been achieved, and we are all the gainers.

But when it comes to the last ground of our claim to having discovered the child, one is disposed to ask whether, instead of having discovered him, we are not doing our best to bury him beneath a mountain of personal effects. Is it any ground for self-laudation that some of us are so lavish with our material gifts to our children? Is it of tricycles, bicycles, mechanical toys, expensive dolls and picture-books out of number, that we are thinking when we claim to have more sympathy with the child than had our forefathers? Are we to conclude that parental tenderness was almost a latent quality during the shining ages which have given us so many heroes, singers and saints?

Is it not possible that we are overlooking one primary fact of childhood, namely, that to the child as to the man it applies, that his riches consist not in the abundance of the things which he possesses? Men of less luxurious ages have given us glimpses of their childhood, revealing the same play of happy fancy as shines out in the child mind to-day; Hood, for example, whose morning sun

"Never came a wink too soon,
Nor brought too long a day."

Wordsworth bounding along the hills of the lake county in an intoxication of animal spirits, Coleridge, watching the embers in the schoolroom grate, and dreaming pleasant dreams of that sister who had been as he says:

"My playmate when we both
Were dressed alike."

Boys will be boys, and girls will be girls too in the matter of outdoor exercise, so far as we will let them), but we act as though we thought they would be broken-hearted misanthropes if we didn't give them everything their neighbours get.

Really, we are on the wrong lines, given sufficiency of wholesome food and shelter, the sympathy and companionship of their parents and seniors, and the outdoor world for their playground, resource will not fail them. A case from

the grocer's, with four strong wheels fastened on to it, a good hill to supply the impetus, and they will ride down with the exhilaration of motor enthusiasts, cheerfully tugging the whole thing up again for the pleasure of repeating the experiment. What is happiness, even the highest forms of it, but the consciousness of energy in operation? With the child the energy, whether mere physical energy, or the energy of imagina-

tion and fancy, will find its own outlet. If the case and four wheels be not available, the child will imagine himself a locomotive, and race along the road with his sisters brining up the rear as trucks; a form of entertainment indulged in by the young friends of the writer.

"Well," you protest, "but we don't seem to have come exactly to the point yet. Why shouldn't the children have all these bicycles and things? It is only their part of the material inheritance of the age?"

That, of course, sounds very reasonable; and if it is justly their part, one must say that it is only natural to wish to see them enjoy it. But, supposing it isn't? For the tendency at present seems to be to make the indulgence of the child and young person general, no matter who else, individually, has to pay the piper. It is not a healthy sign to see the father of a family treated as though his attire possessed the qualities of the clothing and shoes of the itinerant Israelites, whilst his boys must always be well dressed, and his girls supplied with the "sweetest" things in bibs and tuckers. It is not cheering to see the young folks riding round the country on their bicycles whilst their often really loved but too little observed "Dad" is walking lame because of over-mended stockings. It is not a matter for pleasing torment when the old folks have to renounce an afternoon drive because the young folks need so much for various things that they can't afford the cab.

We are all too ready to indulge a feeling of disapprobation toward our forefathers because they were in danger of estranging their children by the practice of too great a severity. One certainly has scant sympathy with the old ideal which relegated the child to an abyss of inarticulate subservience. The child is the darling humourist of the race. Given the right, he will often say something profoundly illuminating. His unconscious winsomeness, untried faith, and the spirit-like touch of his small hand are among the most hallowing of human influences. Therefore, why spoil him? Why begin by fostering the very notion which in us all is among the young ideas which ought to be taught how not to shoot, namely, the idea that everything exists primarily for oneself. Supposing that whereas the sincerity of our forefathers tended to estrange the young from them, the indulgence of ourselves tends to estrange us from the young! Judging by what one reads of the state of some portions of society in America, such seems to be the case there. The picture which comes to us from there of social functions, in which the society of the older people is not looked for, is anything but attractive. Such a state of things justifies the inter-

ference that where people act so, they tacitly declare that physical youth is the only period during which one ought to expect to enjoy a good time.

Youth, as we all know from our own experience of it, is a most intensely egotistic period, but it is, nevertheless, a period fervently responsive to the nobler appeals. And we do it the grossest injustice when we set it apart, to indulge alone in life's confectionery, deny-

ing it the sacred right to share our graver responsibilities.

The fact is that this is an intensely material age. We, on the very crest of the wave of general prosperity (for, thank God, we hardly know the aspect of material destitution), are yet in danger of being conveyed we know not quite whither. "They'll only be young once," we say of our children, and we proceed to stunt them of the very thing which is one means of conducting the spirit to eternal youth, namely, the right to sacrifice. On those lines they will only be young once, for what will there be to fall back on when physical youth is done, only the regrets of memory, not its satisfaction.

Our young people have it in them to respond generously to the call for practical sympathy when it arises. Only the other day the writer heard of a family who were left fatherless. The mother heroically faced the situation, and did what she could to bring up the children well. One of her rewards was that as they grew up they entered into various occupations, saved up some money and sent their mother for a trip home to see their grandmother. To the young mind with all its buoyant imaginations there is something exhilarating about being taken into the councils of their elders, and permitted to contribute to the happiness and help of the home. The bare-legged boy collecting driftwood on the beach to keep his mother's copper boiling on washing-day, the bright girl mending up her old gloves, etc., so that the price of new ones may be devoted to procuring a coveted book for her father, know far more of real enjoyment than do those who are never allowed to know the pinch of economy. Of course, there are sometimes touches of genuine pathos about the child's sense of the problems which face his seniors. For instance, the writer heard of a little boy, the child of a friend, who, having broken his arm, went to the family doctor and asked how much it would cost to have it set!

But for the most part a healthy-minded child is not easily depressed by the knowledge of adverse circumstance. Given the necessities of life, and a little inconvenience, some harmless privations and contrivances will probably be accepted by him or her as truly romantic and like a book. One recalls quite recent instances of childish sacrifices offered in a truly acceptable spirit, a money-box opened and the contents proffered toward the wiping off of an unlooked-for doctor's bill, or a present of a lettuce for the widowed mother, a gift purchased as she was aware, with the child's own money.

Cannot you recollect, reader, for your own part, in the days when bicycles were

big-wheel little-wheel affairs, literally and metaphorically out of reach of the young, when families were large and birthday gifts few, what royal times you had? If you lived in England a good freeze and a pair of skates was happiness in the winter, and in the summer a kite, which appeared to have all your little sisters curl rags in tow, whilst a very occasional gift of sixpence or a shilling was munificence. If you were a girl you probably only had one really good doll in your life, and that nothing so very extra either. You carried your music in a case manufactured out of American leather, but your music was a delight to you, and your master's praise bliss. If you were bred in the colony you may have had to learn on a dumb piano, but you can regard the maiden of to-day with her double-decker hair ribbons, jewellery, and half-guinea music roll without a pang of envy. She is no happier than you were.

It is unjust, fearfully unjust to the young to attempt to buy them off from that place of true comradeship with their elders, which always involves some touches of shadow. They can be bought off. Keep on telling them that they have the best of it, encourage by your asseverations the belief that advanced life is more or less a chilling negation of all youth's glorious dreams and hopes; but, that for your part, while they are young you would prefer to foster their pleasant impressions, by material indulgence. Just let them see that you are wiseful to give them everything they would like, and that you do not expect them to see whether you have even what you need. They will quite possibly get in with it, without in the least noticing how you are wronging them. But perhaps they will not like you the better for it afterwards.

On the other hand, if you want them to come into a youth that shall expand, instead of dwindling, why not take them seriously enough to show them their independence of material things, their right to the sacred joy of helping, the value to yourselves of their bright young comradeship, and the joy of together making for the morning of an ever broadening horizon.

A. B.

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