

CHILDHOOD.



R. STEVENSON thinks that dogs suffer in reputation from intemperate and undeserving eulogy, and in one of his refreshing essays he comes, Carlyle fashion, "as one solitary individual," to their defense, and sets forth their winning weaknesses, their vanities, resentments, jealousies, and caprices.

I wish to imitate his chivalry by defending children from their self-announced friends, and the blessed Christmas-time is certainly a season stimulating to such an effort, so royally is it their festival the world over, and so persistently does the sentimentalist do what he can to deprave it—and them, and to put an end to our fondness for both; and though, to be sure, his success must always be slight enough, it is a pleasure to combat him. Sentimentality has falsified children even more odiously than dogs. Theatrical heroics are more interesting than a dead level of featureless sweetness, and do not misinterpret doghood by such a gulf as is fixed between life and the tradition in this other case.

Truth is not only stranger than fiction, it is also vastly more pleasing and entertaining than the essentially fictitious. The race finally concludes that the comparatively dim Corot is a more gratifying work of art than the landscape of the dime-museum sign-painter in all the splendor of unalloyed blue, green, and orange; and in the metaphysical world as well, it is a moment dangerous to beauty, to health, to sanity, when we set up ideals that are quite divorced from reality. Children are not so white as they are painted, but they give the normal color-loving eye much more delight than if they were.

Not only their moral but their mental qualities are perverted by hearsay and magnified into the monstrous. Who would not feel a terror akin to hate of the infant human being, if he were, for instance, any such infallible judge of character as the sentimentalists continually declare him? Thank God, the facts show that he is no such thing. Perhaps it is perversity that inclines me to put gullibility first among the charms of childhood, but surely its place is not far down the list.

The ability to read people is rare and slight in any class. Shakspeare seems to have failed in so crucial a test as the choice of a wife, and after that the rest of us should be content to

let any happy conjunctions in our intercourse with our kind be accredited to fate, and not pretend to be judges of human nature—what it seems, indeed, no one is or can be, so unaccountable is the compound.

As to children, they are exactly what the scientific thinker would expect from *a priori* reasoning, their perceptions are undeveloped by experience, their vanity is unchecked by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, and our usual standard of judgment, personal gratification, is with them unusually unqualified by any shadow of other considerations. All our lives long we pay so heavily for this universal short-sightedness that it is surely only fair that we should get some innocent pleasure from the exaggerated form of it we find in children. And indeed we may, if we find it pleasant to be loved; it is always open to every person, without the least regard to morals, to gather from their ranks an ardent company of worshipers. Moreover, so far have the sentimentalists worked to the advantage of the vain, that the man or woman who is the object of children's love is assured a special, half-superstitious regard from their elders—not only from their parents, whose softness goes without saying, but from entire communities, from passing car-drivers, and cynical old gentlemen at club windows.

To love children is certainly an amiable human trait, as is a desire to look pretty, or a fondness for using a nice voice; all these things show degrees of good taste, and a kindness to others, not divorced from a pleasing readiness to be flattered; for of course the wish to be loved by them is one with the love of children. The high qualities of moral heroism and lofty idealism are not necessarily much more involved in the one case than in the other.

Yet so deep and general is the conviction that the love of children is an angelic trait, that I myself have had the bitter-sweet experience of receiving an extra meed of regard from my own family, who have had of course a long experience of my many stern virtues, simply because one summer I made myself the idol of all the four-year-olds in the village. My motive was very simple: overworked eyes and an absence of society threw my time on my hands, and in no other way, under the circumstances, could I get so much entertainment—nothing surely, for one thing, being so entertaining as adoration; and putting adorations with adorations, none other (I speak, it is true,

from a highly limited experience) is so flattering as a child's.

I may reason here in a cold-blooded way as to the moral non-significance of children's favor, but "saying aught we leave a world unsaid," and if in the beginning their preference indicates no special moral superiority, it certainly encourages desirable emotions of benevolence and tenderness, and these are so agreeable to their possessor that he feels that he is indeed angelically touched—a state of things not only pleasant but undoubtedly often salutary. Undeniably, too, these conquests have the solid charm of unmistakable success. In other things one waits long for even a degree of triumph, as in attempting an art, or one is perhaps never confident of the exact quality of his good fortune, as when a rich old gentleman marries a poor girl; but with children you are unquestionably assured of your own pleasantness when they are pleased.

Do not infer from this that I go with the sentimentalists as to the sincerity of childhood. Not a bit of it. Children are sincere enough when it is for their comfort, just as you would be if you dared, and in their regal indifference to incomes derived from the retail-grocery trade or the practice of medicine, have no mind to allow themselves to be bored; but for shameless play-acting, who can surpass your ten-months-old daughter, when, sitting on her mother's lap, her piteous wails ascending to heaven, she expresses, seemingly with flowing fountains of tears, her desire to possess your watch or to be tossed in your arms, but who, having gained her purpose, removes her knuckles from her eyes and opens them upon you in tearless luster? Practice does not yet enable her to command tears after the manner of Cleopatra and other ladies, but she does the best she can, and imitates the sounds and movements of weeping very creditably. She may look a little conscious of the perfunctory nature of the performance when it is over, and give you the benefit of her eyelashes as she scans you askance to see what you think of it, but there is more pride than humility in that part of the performance, and she evidently has no real doubt of the fact that it is all very charming—and neither have you.

The duplicity of children becomes more complex than this. I hesitate to lay an exceptionally sincere woman (of her qualities I speak with authority) open to the doubts certain to assail her candor, were I to tell her friends the story of the little red book; but here, with a nameless heroine, let it illustrate my point. She does not know how old she was when she endeavored to make the little red book an instrument of vengeance, but at least her legs did not bend over the edge of the chair;

she has a vivid recollection of them sticking straight out in front of her, as she sat, book in hand, shedding bitter tears over some maternal chastisement. What chastisement, for what offense, is all forgotten, but there she was, and a sense of cruelty and injustice was burning in her soul. As she pondered her wrongs she thought she saw a way to transfer some of the smart of that hour to the far future of her oppressor. She adjusted that little red book, bent her designing noddle over it, and dropped upon it several big tears—how big you can see by the startling size of the white blotches on the faded cover to-day. Her clearly defined idea was that her mother would surely feel remorse strike home to her when in after years she should see that tear-stained volume. The stern parent was quite unsoftened by its pathos at the time, but, happening to see property thus endangered, took it summarily away, and left her daughter to stare, at very close quarters, at her own toes, without the relief of literature. But indeed I think the scheme was well considered, and that, despite all subsequent exposure of its methods, the mother cannot now see those white blotches without a slight pang—the tears fell from such a very little weeper!

Ah, there is the great point, the first and the last, in considering the charms of children—they are such little things! We ascribe to them the virtues we feel we ought to admire because in any case our hearts are so tender to such helplessness.

There is something suggestive and consoling in the gentleness of our judgments of children. They do not have it for one another. It comes with the sense of overwhelmingly dominating power, and if we permit ourselves that degree of anthropomorphism necessary to any coherent reflection upon God, we may please ourselves with the thought of how blessedly minute and touchingly good-for-nothing we must be to the infinite vision. It perhaps approximates some truth, and what more could be said for dogmas that have cost rivers of blood!

The Christian religion certainly teaches us to think those happy who have only to be forgiven for faults akin to those we minimize in children as "childish." "Except ye . . . become as little children?" To my mind it is not at all as if the text said, "Except ye become perfect," or "Except ye become as the angels."

Children are not often angelic, though there is a divine light about them, of which I have not yet taken sufficient account, which, often against the most patent evidence of their earthliness, makes us feel them so. They are earthly, but they are not normally worldly. That is a word of deep significance; it is the true antithesis of childlike; and all the moral superiority

that we can truly claim for children is that they are not world-stained. In which reflections lie some queer comments on the structure of our customary moral codes. It is the faults of hardness, of diseased vanity, of calculated self-seeking, of self-righteousness and of bitter judgments, and not smaller matters, such as lying and stealing and undisciplined appetites, that keep us from being as little children. Far be it from me, who am a citizen with business interests, to call these latter offenses small, nor can I suppose such childish offenders ready for the kingdom of heaven; but according to the standards of the New Testament we must admit that they are in a more hopeful state than the typical Scribe and Pharisee. There is no reason for supposing that becoming as a little child completes the work of grace, but it is stated as an essential preliminary. Whatever your standards, you assuredly must often feel how much more troublesome is pharisaical virtue than publican vice, how much more insidious and difficult to deal with. But this is a groan from an overcharged heart, and has nothing to do with the subject.

As there is nothing in our judgments of children to differentiate them from our decisions upon one another, except the clear-sightedness that comes from overlooking them, and the fairness and generosity resulting from a comfortable assurance that we are beyond their competition, it is instructive to observe that we apply to them something like Christian standards, finding offensive in them meannesses and coldnesses which are hardly reckoned in when we are deliberately estimating the moral worth of our peers; and correspondingly we are complacent toward such deflections as we are taught to condemn most severely in one another. No one hates a child for stealing sugar, but who could forgive him, even though he obtained his sweets in the most regular manner, if he habitually devoted them to knowing commercial speculations made at the expense of more eager and trusting infants?

And indeed, as to our condemnations and approvals of the grown-up world, if we are of the happy and right-minded majority who keep a proper distance between theory and practice, despite our consciences we continue to choose the society of many a kindly reprobate in preference to that of some highly respectable vestryman who demands continual tribute to his self-love, and has about as much sympathy as a chess-automaton. We are content to give him our verbal approval, and, against our opinion, we go in practice with Jesus of Nazareth, and seek the more childlike companionship. Happy is the generation that has had the beauty of childlikeness painted for it by Jefferson's "Rip Van Winkle," and it is reas-

suring to remember that the preachers and the pious in general have approved that work of art; yet, still, many a young reasoner, arguing from accepted standards, must often wonder why, and, as with tears and laughter he sees the ever-recurring failure of dear Rip's good resolutions, must bless what seems to him a puzzling lack of logic. But the application of these Christian standards to moral codes is too delicate a business for the workaday world. It is hopeless at present to devise a penal code for the unchildlike (the groan for which I apologized a moment since as not germane to the subject has, after all, its place here), but it is a step toward that distant reform to study from life, not merely from hearsay, what children really are.

I find in them a mental superiority perhaps more marked than their moral distinction, if you will permit, for the sake of convenience, this arbitrary and superficial separation of the inseparable. The most telling fact for pessimism that I see is the demoralizing effect of life upon—must I say most people? At any rate, it is a question whether the majority benefit by their experience of this world; if they do, why should the word worldly have such dire significance?

The decline in nobility between twenty and forty is a standing subject of sorrow to the judicious, but surely it often begins long before, and from the first it is a mental as well as a moral degradation.

The little children of the race are intellectually more respectable than the majority of its adults. To be sure, it is their attitude and not their achievements that makes them so; but in estimating the human being as a mind rather than as "a screw in the social machine," who can help thinking the attitude more important than the achievement? The abounding intellectual curiosity of children, and their continual return to the biggest and deepest questions,—the origin of things, the sources and ends of being,—these are what make them superior. What if the questions can never be absolutely answered? Is it not infinitely more respectable to have them earnestly in mind than, accepting some mumbo-jumbo reply, to dismiss them altogether and to devote existence wholly to the frivolities we call business, or pleasure, or learning? What else was Carlyle's fundamental *raison d'être* but his power to recall us to a degree of the serious reasonable wonder with which we start in life?

Upon my word, I sometimes think that if the world were started now on a new plan, and peopled altogether with the middle-aged, religions, after going on a short time through the impetus of custom, would die out all over the world from this simple lack of interest in the questions they primarily undertake to an-



ENGRAVED BY W. B. CLOSSON.

OWNED BY ARTHUR ASTOR CAREY.

MOTHER AND CHILD. BY ABBOTT H. THAYER.

swer. As it is, the children force us to keep some sort of theory of existence furbished up.

Perhaps it is the seriousness of its interests that invests childhood with the mysterious, evanescent, exquisite beauty Wordsworth had in mind when he wrote:

The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting, and cometh from
afar:

Not in entire forgetfulness, and not in utter naked-
ness,

But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.

The haunting charm of these lines is not the result of their doctrine, but results from a statement of it that subtly suggests this nameless other-world loveliness. Neither does my rashly ventured explanation explain—or, at most, it goes a very little way. We simply do not know what gives childhood such divine aspects. The fact is one of those grateful, poetical phenomena, of which the world happily contains several, that turn the edge of scientific explanations as the ambient air of some enchanted chamber in a fairy story resists Damascus blades.

Of course, in this case, it is left to the skeptical simply to deny this supreme grace to the miniature human being, and the candid observer must admit that children are touched with it in widely varying degrees. Nevertheless, if you wish, you will probably not need to go far to find a little child to sit in the midst of these scoffers, the sight of whom will simply shut their mouths with shame. With all the immortal pictures of the Christ-child in the world, I have never seen one that so echoed the special ineffable loveliness of soul peculiar to ideal childhood as does a baby, sitting on the mother's lap, painted by Mr. Abbott H. Thayer, and first exhibited several years ago by the Society of American Artists. There was at that time among painters a good deal of discussion—a fact in itself flattering—of Mr. Thayer's technical methods and achievements; any one who sympathizes with the painter's point of view in this picture must find that its technic achieves the one great success—that it pictorially, happily, and subtly expresses his feeling for his subject. The sight of it brings over one afresh the sense of the unfathomable miracles of the painter's art—that mortal man can so infuse matter with spirit, and bend materials so stubborn to ends so exquisite. This

child has the light of heaven in its face, the light of heaven just fading before growing wonder at this strange world, and faintly shadowed by a timid shrinking from its unknown ways that melts the heart with its pathos and its beauty.

Rare as this perfect flowering of the human being must always be, I have seen the same look on one little face after another throughout my life, and its significance passes beyond the range of our reason's conscious grasp. It is a portent and a wonder, and sings songs to the soul no words will ever say.

The fact that so many of us, like Mr. Wegg, decline and fall pretty steadily through life, tells for pessimism, but it is still overbalanced by the optimistic sign given us in the spiritual height from which some of us start; and this sign is none the less impressive for being so mysterious. I do not allow myself to be cast down because these angel faces are often borne by babies who need spanking much oftener than they are likely to get it, for there is a great deal in the richest ore besides gold; but, I admit, it is sadly depressing to see so many children who give little sign of a birthright of grace. How can any one declare he adores them in the lump, after the sentimental manner, when the very infant in arms so often shows a soul-sickening, self-evident likeness to an aggressive, stupid father, or a sharp, vulgar little fool of a mother? Still I believe the case is not then so bad as it looks to the casual but sensitive observer. A wise woman tells me that it is not the sheer fatuity of folly that enchants people with the most unprepossessing young one when it happens to be their own, but that truly it is only its own family who can ever really know a baby's charms, and it is her belief that if we could have all the evidence before us in even the most unaccountable case, we should see that the worshipers were wiser than the scoffing world.

We all know that the tiresomest brat can present wonderfully appealing aspects—say when only the little back is seen, and its sleepy wee head has fallen trustfully on a grown-up shoulder. Science may account for the pull the sight makes on your heart-strings, but in some way, after you have duly informed yourself as to the evolution of the emotions, it is still apt in experience, like childhood's own gaze, to carry tidings to your deeper, perhaps all but unconscious, self of precious undiscovered possessions and kinships in the universal sources.

Viola Roseboro'.