

CHILDREN'S PLEASURES.

MY dear children, you must go into the nursery and keep quiet. Don't you see I am busy, and cannot be disturbed?"

"But, mamma, we have nothing to do."

"Nothing to do! Cannot nurse find you anything to do? Why do you come bothering me so?"

"Perhaps they would value their treasures more if they had fewer of them," said I. "I always think it is a great mistake to let children have many toys at once, because they only get tired of them, and break them; and I think also that simple ones please them quite as much if not more than very elaborate ones. However,



"THE CHILDREN BEGAN WITH GREAT GLEE" (p. 302).

"Nurse says we're to be quiet, too, mamma."

"Play with your toys; you have plenty."

"We're tired of them."

"It is a strange thing," said Mrs. Johnson, turning to me, "my husband and I spend more money than any of our acquaintance in buying toys, and yet our children never seem contented. They are always wanting something fresh."

we cannot leave the little ones unhappy. May I go into the nursery after them?"

"Oh, yes, if you care to do so," said Mrs. Johnson, "and I am sure you are very kind; but it will be of no use. If you find them employment they will be tired of it in half-an-hour, and want something else. Nurse does not look after them as she ought to do," she continued, in an aggrieved tone.

"If the mother does not care to make their childhood bright and pleasant, it can scarcely be expected that a nurse will do it," I thought, though of course I did not express my thoughts; and I made my way into the nursery.

Things there seemed rather dismal. The room was bright and cheerful-looking, but the children appeared cross and dissatisfied. A tidy-looking nursemaid was sitting with them, and the floor was strewn with toys of all kinds, in various stages of dilapidation. As I entered I overheard nurse saying, "Why not build something pretty with your bricks?" which was answered by a simultaneous scornful chorus of—"Bricks!"

"Don't you like playing at bricks, then?" I asked. "I think it is great fun. I know some little boys who have fine games with bricks. They build two or three stations—say here, and here, and here—and then they make arches and railway bridges, and they put one or two bricks upon each other for trains, and themselves pretend to be railway guards, and take up passengers. Then they need to be very careful, because sometimes the trains run into one another, which of course is very sad, and mischief is done that has to be repaired. How would you like to play at that game? Supposing we build a station here, and call it Bradford, and make you, Johnnie, station-master. Then we will put another here, and call it London: *you*, Lucy, shall be station-master."

"Girls are not station-masters," said Frank, who seemed to think his brother and sister were mollified with undignified haste.

"They are in this game," I replied. "You, Frank, had better be the guard, and accompany the down trains, and Herbert the guard to accompany the up trains. Now set to work and build the line."

The children began with great glee, and soon I stole away, leaving them enjoying themselves heartily, as was shown by the peals of laughter which were shortly heard.

"Well, have you satisfied them?" inquired Mrs. Johnson.

"Yes, I think they are happy for a little time, at any rate. Poor little mites! they only wanted an idea to start with, and once they have got that, they will work it out for themselves. Very young children can seldom originate anything new, and if they do, their fancies ought to be carefully noted."

"Why?"

"Because it is such a guide for the parents, and shows them where the talent of the children lies. You seldom hear of a man making his mark in any particular branch, who has not shown by his amusements in youth what is his natural taste."

"Oh, dear!" said Mrs. Johnson; "you seem to regard children's amusements and children's pleasures as quite solemn things."

"And quite right too," said Jack, my husband, who with Mr. Johnson entered the room at this moment. "I wish every one regarded them in that light. People often speak as if children's lives were full of brightness, free from care and anxiety, but I believe very often

they are quite the reverse. The troubles of childhood seem very small to us, but they are very important to the little folks themselves, and it is worth while bestowing a little sympathy upon them."

"Oh, yes! indeed it is," said I. "There are sorrows enough in after-life. Childhood's days ought to be bright. 'He who makes a child's life happy is a co-worker with God.'"

"That is all very well," observed Mr. Johnson, "but children differ so. Now take ours. I think I may say honestly that we spare no expense to make our children happy. They have a pleasant playground, a comfortable nursery, interesting picture-books, and most expensive toys; and yet their mother tells me that they are continually wanting something they have not got."

"I certainly do not believe," said Jack, "that those children are necessarily the happiest who are the richest in toys. Look at the little dirty youngsters in the street. They get far more enjoyment out of the manufacture of dirt-pies by the side of the road than their more fortunate brothers and sisters get out of costly playthings. It is with children as with grown-up people; happiness is more a question of disposition than of surroundings."

"I think, when trying to give children pleasure and make them happy," said I, "one is apt to forget how little delights them."

"I believe," remarked Mrs. Johnson, "that what delights them more than anything is to break the furniture and tear their clothes."

"Oh, no! they are not often wilfully mischievous. They 'feel their life in every limb,' and *cannot* always be still. Most healthy children prefer games full of action—even rough games if you like; and it is much better that they should do so. Healthy romping saves many a doctor's bill. Parents ought to be very careful how they repress the spirits of their little ones too hastily, and should try not to be continually saying, 'Hush, hush! be still!'"

"When it can be managed," said Jack, "it is a splendid thing to give them a room all to themselves, in the attics if possible, far away from the haunts of the family, where they can shout, and jump, and run to their heart's content. But of course this is not always practicable. At the same time, I must say I should put danger out of their way as much as possible, and I should not choose a room with an open fire or a window that opened upon the leads for their delectation."

"No, I should think not," remarked Mrs. Johnson. "Fancy my Johnnie under such circumstances! I almost tremble to think of it."

"There is one way nowadays in which children are very badly and injudiciously treated, in my opinion," said Jack, "and that is in trying to cheat them as it were into getting knowledge, under the guise of pleasure. How many books there are that commence in a most interesting way, and in a very short time the juvenile reader finds himself lightly introduced to one of the abstruse sciences! I do call that too bad. That kind of thing does more harm than good, because

there is no royal road to learning. Knowledge can only be acquired by patient study, and the attempt to entrap boys and girls into catching some of it in this way only tends to disgust them with books, which is a great mistake. The very boys and girls who will read these kind of books are unfortunately the ones who ought not to do so, for they are most likely the quiet, studious children, who want to be taken from study, not drawn into it."

"Then do you not believe in what is called combining instruction with amusement?" said Mr. Johnson.

"I should not feel inclined to say that I did not believe in it at all, but I am sure it requires to be done most judiciously and with great discrimination, or it is most useless. A wise teacher can sometimes impart knowledge to a child almost without his being conscious of it, in the course of a ramble through the woods or by the sea-shore; or even if he does not supply actual scientific facts, he can do what is far more important, he can awaken habits of observation and reflection which, if only they can be once roused, never slumber again. There is no need to buy toys, though, in order to amuse children. We have a clever little friend who can interest our youngsters for hours; telling them stories, and illustrating her tale as she goes on, by cutting out in writing-paper, chairs, tables, footstools, old ladies, gallant gentlemen, umbrellas, walking-sticks, rampant bulls, fiery steeds, and peaceful pussy-cats. Another—a gentleman—will make out of orange-peel, valuable shorthorns, and gentle baa-lambs; and with no other materials than two or three sheets of paper, will fabricate boats, barges, windmills, cocked hats, bellows, looking-glasses, bread-baskets, cocks and hens, and numberless articles."

"That is what I like so much in the Kindergarten system of education for little ones," said I. "The teachers aim at awakening the faculties rather than cramming the children's memories with detail. Have you ever realised what an achievement it is for a child to learn to read and write? It seems almost as if that ought not to be attempted with quite a young child. These teachers do not make the attempt. They endeavour to bring a child's powers into play, and act in such a way that if there are any talents hidden under the curly pates, they are likely to show themselves."

"Ah!" observed Mrs. Johnson, "you talk about the difficulty of learning to read and write: what is it for a girl to learn to sew? Of course, I agree with all superior people, in thinking that it is most important a girl should be taught this most useful domestic art. But surely it need not be made a bugbear; and nowadays it is either left alone altogether, or made most unpleasant. I always think of that part of my own education with horror. I had a most excellent aunt, Mary Anne, who considered that my mother did not sufficiently look after me in this respect; and, in order to make up for her deficiencies, used to invite me to spend the day with her, and on each occasion a long seam was brought out, and a length marked, which I was ordered to finish before I left off. Again and again I rebelled, and then I was held up as a shocking example to my cousins, who sat in their places, sewing

with deft fingers, and looking pictures of virtue. Oh, dear!" she continued, laughing; "my hands used to get so hot; and the needles would stick, and the seam went into very deep mourning before it was finished, and the stitches looked so large! I believe, if that state of things had continued, I should never have liked needlework."

"But you sew so well now, and seem to like it so much. How is that?"

"It happened that another aunt came to pay us a visit, and she found out the mischief that was being done, and interposed on my behalf. She discarded the hateful seam altogether, and in place of it gave me a large doll, which would be so lovely when it was dressed, and she promised to help me if I would try to dress it; and, although I was rather suspicious at first, I soon began to take an interest in my work, and in a little time grew quite fond of it."

"Ah! your second aunt was a wise woman. But what strange ideas some people have!" said Jack. "I know one lady—a most sensible, excellent woman, in many respects—who makes it a boast that she never allowed her girls to waste their time over books. The consequence is, her daughters, with good average abilities, have no taste whatever for reading, and unfortunately cannot acquire it now, I fear; for I do not think it is possible for any one to gain such a liking except in early life. The art of sewing may be learnt, but not the love of reading. Another most conscientious, well-meaning mother never allows her children to read fairy tales, or any works of fiction, and so represses, as far as she can, all imagination in her children, which is a terrible calamity. The most peculiar educational fancy that I know of, however, is one which possesses an acquaintance of my wife's. This lady thinks that life is so full of sadness, that the best thing she can do for her children is to accustom them to disappointment. Consequently, she promises them little treats, and at the last moment revokes her promise; takes tickets for the pantomime, and, when the children are ready for setting out, sends them off to bed, and so on."

"What a horrible woman!" said Mrs. Johnson. "I should think she is doing her children an amount of harm, in leading them to doubt her truthfulness."

"I don't think, so far, the result of her teaching has been very satisfactory. The children are bitter and cynical, and they are almost always in tears, and seem to regard disappointment quite as a matter of course."

Well-meaning people make blunders at times, and there are plenty of quicksands to avoid, even in such a seemingly simple thing as trying to make children happy. If you indulge them too much, pleasures pall on them, and they grow exacting and selfish. If they are kept too strictly, they become envious and discontented. In this, as in most other things, the path of wisdom lies between the two extremes; and whilst it may safely be asserted that no children should be kept without pleasures, their amount and character must be left to the judicious parent, who has studied the character and disposition of the child.

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