

THE RESPECT DUE TO YOUTH.*

A baby has to fall. It is natural, and not funny. So does the young child have to make mistakes as he learns any or all of the crowding tasks set before him; but these are not fair grounds for ridicule.

I was walking in a friend's garden, and met for the first time the daughter of the house, a tall, beautiful girl of nineteen or twenty. Her aunt, who

was with me, cried out in an affected tone, "Come and meet the lady, Janey!"

The young girl, who was evidently unpleasantly impressed, looked annoyed, and turned aside in some confusion, speaking softly to her teacher who was with her. Then the aunt, who was a very muscular woman, seized the young lady by her shoulders, lifted her off the ground, and thrust her blushing, struggling and protesting into my arms—by way of introduction! Naturally enough the girl was over-

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come with mortification and conceived a violent dislike for me. (This story is exactly true, except that the daughter of the house was aged two and a half.)

Now why—in the name of reason, courtesy, education, justice, any lofty and noble consideration—why should Two-and-a-half be thus insulted? What is the point of view of the insulter? How does she justify her brutal behavior? Is it on the obvious ground of physical superiority in age and strength? It cannot be that, for we do not gratuitously outrage the feelings of all persons younger and smaller than ourselves. A stalwart six-foot septuagenarian does not thus comport himself towards a small gentleman of thirty or forty. It cannot be relationship; for such conduct does not obtain among adults, be they never so closely allied. It has no basis except that the victim is a child, and the child has no personal rights which we feel bound to respect.

A baby, when "good," is considered as a first-rate plaything—a toy to play with or to play on or to set going like a machine-toy, that we may laugh at it. There is a legitimate frolicking with small children, as the cat plays with her kittens; but that is not in the least inconsistent with respect. Grown people can play together and laugh together without jeering at each other. So we might laugh with our children, even more than we do, and yet never laugh at them. The pathetic side of it is that children are even more sensitive to ridicule than grown people. They have no philosophy to fall back upon; and—here is the hideously unjust side—if they lose their tempers, being yet unlearned in self-restraint—if they try to turn the tables on their tormentors, then the wise "grown-up" promptly punishes them for "disrespect." They must respect their elders even in this

pitiful attitude; but who is to demand the respect due to youth?

In the baby's first attempt to speak we amused ourselves mightily over his innocent handling of rude phrases—overheard by chance or even taught him, that we might make merry over the guileless little mouth, uttering at our behest the words it did not understand. Then a year or so older, when he says the same things, he is laboriously and painfully taught that what is proper for a parent to say to a child is not proper for a child to say to a parent. "Why?" puzzles the child. We can give no answer, except our large assumption that there is no respect due to youth.

Ask any conscientious mother or father why the new human being, fresh from God as they profess to believe, not yet tainted by sin or weakened by folly and mistake, serene in its mighty innocence and serious beyond measure, as its deep eyes look solemnly into life—why this wonderful kind of humanity is to be treated like a court fool?

From the deeper biological standpoint, seeing the foremost wave of advancing humanity in each new generation, there is still less excuse for such contemptuous treatment. In the child is lodged the piled-up progress of the centuries, and, as he shall live, is that progress hastened or retarded. Quite outside of the natural affection of the parent for the offspring stands this deep, human reverence for the latest and best specimen of its kind. Every child should represent a higher step in racial growth than its parents, and every parent should reverently recognize this. For a time the parent has the advantage. He has knowledge, skill and power; and we feel that in the order of nature he is set to minister to the younger generation till it shall supplant him. To develop such a noble feeling has taken a long time,

and many steps upward through those cruder sentiments which led toward it. Yet it is the rational, conscious feeling into which the human being translates the whole marvellous law of parental love.

To the animal this great force expresses itself merely in instinct; but, as such, it is accepted and fulfilled, and the good of the young subserved unquestioningly. In low grades of human life we have still this animal parental instinct largely predominating, colored more or less with some prevision of the real glory of the work in hand. Yet so selfish is human parentage that in earlier times children have been sold as slaves in the interests of parents, have been, and still are, set to work prematurely; and in certain races the father looks forward to having a son for various religious benefits accruing to him, the father.

Sentiments like these are not conducive to respect for youth. The mother is not generally selfish, in this sense. Her error is in viewing the child too personally, depending too much on "instinct," and giving very little thought to the matter. She loves much and serves endlessly, but reasons little. The child is pre-eminently "her" child, and is treated as such. Intense affection she gives, and such forms of discipline and cultivation as are within her range, unflagging care and labor also; but "respect" for the bewitching bundle of cambric she has so elaborately decorated does not occur to her.

Note the behavior of a group of admiring women around a baby on exhibition. Its clothes are prominent, of course, in their admiration; and its toes, fingers and dimples generally. They kiss it and cuddle it and play with it, and the proud mamma is pleased. When the exhibitee is older and more conscious, it dislikes these scenes intensely. Being "dressed up" and passed round for the observation

and remark of the grown-up visitors is an ordeal we can all remember.

Why cannot a grown person advance to make the acquaintance of a child with the same good manners used in meeting an adult? Frankness, naturalness and respect, these are all the child wants. And precisely these he is denied. We put on an assumed interest—a sort of stage manner—in accosting the young, and for all our pretense pay no regard to their opinions or confidence, when given. Really well-intentioned persons, parents or otherwise, will repeat before strangers some personal opinion, just softly whispered in their ears, with a pair of little arms holding fast to keep the secret close; dragging it out remorselessly before the persons implicated, while the betrayed child squirms in wretchedness and anger.

To do this to a grown-up friend would warrant an angry dropping of acquaintance. Such traitorous rudeness would not be tolerated by man or woman. But the child—the child must pocket every insult, as belonging to a class beneath respect.

Childhood is not a pathological condition, nor a term of penal servitude, nor a practical joke. A child is a human creature, and entitled to be treated as such. A human body three feet long is deserving of as much respect as a human body six feet long. Yet the bodies of children are handled with the grossest familiarity. We pluck and pull and push them, tweak their hair and ears, pat them on the head, chuck them under the chin, kiss them, and hold them on our laps entirely regardless of their personal preferences. Why should we take liberties with the person of a child other than those suitable to an intimate friendship at any age?

"Because children don't care," some one will answer. But children do care. They care enormously. They dislike

certain persons always because of disagreeable physical contact in childhood. They wriggle down clumsily, all their clothes rubbed the wrong way, with tumbled hair and flushed, sulky faces from the warm "lap" of some large woman or bony, woolly-clothed man, who was holding them with one

hand and variously assaulting them with the other, and rush off in helpless rage. No doubt they "get used to it," as eels do to skinning; but in this process of accustoming childhood to brutal discourtesy we lose much of the finest, most delicate development of human nature.

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