

# “WHERE DO BABIES COME FROM?”

BY GRACE ADAMS

SOME time between the ages of three and seven the normally inquisitive child, who has not yet acquired the idea that certain phases of life are necessarily dark and “dirty,” and who still has implicit faith in the omniscience of its parents, will confront them with the question, “Where do babies come from?”

That simple query has caused more worry to parents and more needless embarrassment to their offspring, and it has also been responsible for more ponderous books being written and more tedious lectures listened to, than any other five-word sentence that could possibly be fashioned in any language.

Would parents, and other persons who feel conscientiously responsible for the correct instruction of the human young, derive any comfort from being assured that so long as the child who asks this question is no more than six years old, the exact wording of its reply is of slight importance? The natural, casual manner in which it is delivered is all that really matters.

There have, in general, been two methods of answering this simple and almost universal question. The one that was piously sanctioned during the latter part of the past century and the first part of the present one, was silence, stern disapproval, and the advice that nice little boys and girls never asked or thought about such things. The more modern method, and the one that is now most enthusiastically

endorsed by earnest and broad-minded educators, is a detailed, serious and self-conscious lecture upon anatomy, physiology, embryology, and all the other subjects that could conceivably have any relation to childbirth.

I trust that I will be considered neither a hardened conservative nor an unregenerate radical if I advance the modest opinion that each of these methods is as bad as the other, for each fails conspicuously to answer the honest, straightforward question that the child has asked; and that both make an equally unpleasant impression upon a curious young mind, because both of them, in divergent ways, cause human birth to become a more important and much sexier affair than the normal six-year-old had ever suspected it to be.

If we examine those few short words—“Where do babies come from?”—without prejudice or emotion, we realize that when a youngster first mouths them, they contain no reference to sex whatsoever. The child is not inquiring about the mysterious process through which infants are conceived, or the painful process by which they are born, but honestly and naturally about the place from which they come. And his question, unless grown-ups choose to freight it with dark and sordid implications, is not at all different from thousands of other questions that children ask when they first begin to take an intelligent and inquisitive interest in the world about them: “Where does the sun live at night?”

"Where do the stars go in the daytime?"  
 "Where did you buy my wooly bear?"  
 "Where did you get this candy?"

## II

The child of less than seven years does not yet suspect that a baby is the miraculous result of a sexual union between a man and a woman. He accepts it, realistically, as an animated and very interesting doll. He assumes, without devoting any profound thought to the matter, that its parents got it ready-made, but he wants to know exactly what he asks: where this was. This becomes especially evident when we examine the variations from the standard "Where do babies come from?" that have been recorded by the most competent child psychologists, from Stanley Hall to Jean Piaget.

A child of three and a half asks, "Mama, where did you find me?" Another of the same age wants to know, "Where was I when you were a little girl?" A third, a few months older, begins, "Mama, where did I come from?" and then becoming suddenly philosophical, continues, "Where *do* people get all these children from?" A girl of four is apparently getting closer to factual particulars when she inquires, "Where is the baby now that a lady is going to have next summer?"

The most honest, logical, and seemingly the most direct answer to this last question should be, "It is inside her." And that is the exact reply that it actually received. Yet it proved to be singularly unconvincing, for the child retorted instantly and skeptically, "Has she eaten it then?"

Such honest information can have even more confusing results. A girl of six asked her mother in the presence of her four-year-old brother if babies came from heaven. The mother who was deter-

minedly modern, and had been preparing herself for this particular question for several years, answered positively and very seriously, "No, they come from their mothers' stomachs." There was something so forbidding about the emphatic manner of her reply that, to her great disappointment, both children felt constrained from discussing the subject with her any further. But they did talk about it for a long while between themselves. And later in the day when they were visited by a friend, who in spite of her twenty-odd years they somehow considered a contemporary, the little boy greeted her with this astounding news, "Mother told us the funniest thing this morning. She said babies come out of people's stomachs. We don't think we believe her. Do you?"

The friend said she did. And the boy smiled knowingly to himself and seemed secretly delighted with this added confirmation. But his sister was unsatisfied. "I still don't believe it," she declared. "I can't remember anything about it. Wasn't it awful dark in there? Wasn't I very much afraid? Did I cry a lot?"

When it was patiently explained to her that while dwelling within her mother she was not yet a complete baby, but only a gradually developing seed, her unbelief increased. "Now, I know it isn't so," she concluded with finality. "I couldn't have been a seed when I am really a girl."

Her brother refused to argue about the subject any more, but a few hours later when his supper was brought to him he showed quite clearly why he had been so pleased to learn of the mysterious things that may occur in human abdomens. Glancing disdainfully at his tray, he said to the maid, "You know very well that I don't like scrambled eggs. Tell Cook to put these back and get me some nice strawberry jam out of her stomach."

The facts of gestation, no matter how carefully they are explained, seem equally unconvincing, or equally preposterous, to most youthful minds. Another four-year-old upon being informed that babies came from within their mothers apparently accepted the strange knowledge and pondered it. But after several minutes of serious deliberation she was wondering audibly, “But where does its little head come from? Where do its little legs come from, and its little stomach?” And still another child of the same age rejected the same type of factual explanation by retorting, “But how can the mother put her hands into her stomach to make it?”

It is from trying to answer such counter-questions as these that we realize how impossible it is for a child of less than seven to understand such involved concepts as the processes of conception, gestation and birth. It can do no harm to explain to the young child, as the advanced educators urge us to do, about the operations through which the seeds from the little father mouse are brought into communion with the seeds within the little mother mouse—but there is a serious doubt that it will do much good.

When children of four or five or six years ask about the origin of themselves, their younger brothers and sisters, or of the strange young infant that is screaming lustily next door, they are generally entirely indifferent to the general laws of procreation. They are, on the contrary, exceedingly interested in individual, well-formed human beings. Thus, the most intelligently honest of scientific explanations are very likely to leave their curiosity unsatisfied.

Even those children, who have heard that babies come from within their mothers often enough to accept this statement as a necessary and rather tiresome

article of faith, still cannot grasp its implications. The simple truth seems to be that the idea of a completely formed, squawking, kicking infant evolving from a combination of two minute, essentially inhuman seeds is an idea too complex and intricate to be comprehended by the normal six-year-old mind. Children of this age, and younger, are usually sure that babies are made and manufactured, not evolved; and no matter how reasonably and expertly they are informed to the contrary, they persist in this belief. The greatest concession they will make to the superior knowledge of their elders is in considering that “the mothers make their own babies.”

Renee, who was already seven years old, was tremendously interested in the arrival of a younger sister in her family. She told her school-mates as much as she could about the event and then confronted her teacher with this question, “Mademoiselle, what part of my little sister did they make first?”

Tactful Mademoiselle countered with, “How do you think a baby is made, Renee? Hasn’t your mother told you?”

For a minute Renee was uncertain; then she answered wisely, “Well, I know anyway. Mummy still had some flesh left over after I was born. To make my little sister she modelled it with her fingers and kept it hidden for a long while.”

When a five-year-old boy asked his seven-year-old playmate, “What do mummies eat to be able to make babies?” he received this morsel of superior wisdom in reply, “Oh, why, lots of meat and lots of milk.” The belief that babies are modelled from flesh or blood or milk seems to be an especially prevalent and hardy conviction of early childhood, but it is not always the mother who is held responsible for the infants’ final form.

A small girl of four, who had already been provided with the scientific facts about her younger sister, one day suddenly asked her mother, "Mummy, how are ladies made?"

When Mummy wanted to know why she was asking such a question she explained, "Because there is such a lot of meat on ladies."

"What ladies?"

"You and the other ones." Then without waiting for her mother's comment on this phenomenon, the child continued, "I think it's a meat-maker who makes them, don't you?"

Another child of five volunteered the information that God made the babies and that "He uses lots of goats' blood for it."

And when still another small girl asked, "Where do babies come from?" she did not even stop for an answer, but assured the adult who was ready to give her the proper facts, "I really know already. I should go to a butcher and gets lots of meat and then shape it."

### III

If a child of seven still insists upon believing, no matter how carefully he has been instructed to the contrary, that the creation of a baby is essentially the same as the modelling of a doll, a vase, or a mud-pie, then transferring the scene of this manufacture from heaven or a cabbage patch to the hidden interior of a woman still leaves the child's mind somewhat hazy about the processes of gestation. And if a child cannot quite understand any scientific concepts, either of physics or biology, why should it not be allowed, during its earliest years, to stick to those explanations of childbirth which satisfy it so admirably?

Unless we wish to make sex appear to be a vastly different and more important subject than any other about which children ask their spontaneous and unexpected questions, why is it any more intellectually dishonest to allow a youngster to continue in his own ingrained belief that God or a meat-maker constructs the babies than to persuade him by charming fantasies to imagine that Jack Frost paints the window panes and Santa Claus brings the Christmas presents?

There are, of course, many parents who will not tolerate childish beliefs in Jack Frost or Santa Claus, who want their children taught nothing except substantiated and absolute facts. Parents who banish Mother Goose and the Brothers Grimm from their nurseries, and substitute for them modern outlines of scientific knowledge, have, of course, the right to do just what they are so conscientiously trying to accomplish. Such parents believe in all sincerity that through their rigid honesty they are protecting their children from the disillusionments that must necessarily follow the later, more mature realization that the world contains no such illustrious personages as Jack the Giant Killer, Little Red Riding Hood, and Little Boy Blue.

Yet in their earnest worship of scientific truth these conscientious parents overlook one fact that is of tremendous practical importance. This is that early childhood is not only a preparation for later life; it is also a definite period of living which has its own characteristic prejudices and predilections.

The child mind, despite all the lovely theories that have been woven around it, is neither reasonable nor fantastically imaginative. It is essentially realistic, and being realistic it eschews, because it cannot whole-heartedly believe in them, most

of the brilliant and informing facts of science.

The whole world as the child regards it is a world fashioned and controlled by the personal whims of strange and mighty grown-ups. Some of these lordly people it knows very well because it lives in the same house with them. But, so it believes, there must be others, with whom it is not quite so well acquainted, whose duties require them to produce fires and babies, snow storms and Christmas presents. It is in the arbitrary acts of such powerful persons, rather than in the impersonal laws of physics or biology, that the child mind seeks the explanation of the natural phenomena which arouse its spontaneous curiosity.

And parents would do well to keep this fact in mind when answering their children's questions, especially when they refer to so complex a subject as procreation. It is always foolish, and likely to be harmful, to try to shield a child from that great field of knowledge that is called "the facts of life." Every child has the

right to absorb all the information that he can at the earliest possible age, and sexual information should be as readily accessible as any other kind.

But parents should remember that such information is not often greatly appreciated or even clearly understood before the age of eight or nine. Up to this time it is not the specific instruction about sexual affairs that impresses the child most deeply, but rather the attitude toward such matters that he has acquired gradually, subtly and almost unconsciously, from the older people with whom he lives most intimately. If a youngster reaches his later childhood without having his questions about babies unduly shushed or unduly emphasized, and without having his somewhat erroneous ideas contradicted too often or too sharply, then he can accept the more detailed facts which he will then acquire (and parents can never be too sure about how he will acquire them) with that casual wholesomeness which is one of the best guarantees of a sane and normal attitude toward life.

# THE STATE OF THE UNION

## THE DEMOCRATIC COMEDY IN MAINE

BY DANE YORKE

Portland, Maine

IT was the boast of the great Neal Dow, Father of Prohibition, that in driving rum from his State he wrecked the Democratic Party of Maine. Whether Dow actually did it, or the Civil War, matters little; the fact remains that the party was somehow wrecked, and has stayed wrecked. In the past seventy-five years there has not emerged a single Maine Democrat of national political importance, nor has there been in all that time a single Presidential election in which a Democratic national candidate has received a majority of the State's popular vote. Even in 1932 Herbert Hoover carried Maine by a vote 30% greater than that given Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Which makes amusing the legend that Maine led the Roosevelt landslide by the election of a Democratic Governor—her fourth in seventy-five years. The gubernatorial balloting took place in September, two months before the national elections, and its result was not determined by national issues. For some years back the Republican State organization had been daring Fate by putting up candidates whose general character is somewhat indicated by the exhortation of one county leader to his troops. "Shoulder your muskets," he cried, "and hold your noses tight. And march right up and vote the straight Republican ticket." In September of 1932 the

good old discipline failed, and more than 45,000 Republican voters played hookey from duty at the Maine polls, but they did not forget themselves for long. In November of that same year Hoover was given a vote of 166,631 against the Democratic vote of 128,907. It all happened in two months.

Now, obviously, a State organization that has not been able to deliver the State's Electoral College vote, must needs approach Washington with either bluff or timidity. The Maine Democrats seem to have chosen timidity, and the situation has given rise to some of the strangest antics and blunderings ever seen in rugged homespun Maine. For example, in June of 1933 (and early in the New Deal) when the *Amberjack II* cruised along the Pine Tree coast, it was the fond desire of a certain State dignitary to show his patriotism in the rotogravure sections by clasping the President's hand in welcome to Maine. A man, or even a politician, of ordinary horse sense and ability would have conveyed that wish direct, but such simplicity was beyond this Democratic big shot. He preferred instead to hunt up a previously obscure Maine citizen whom he somehow knew to be a friend of the President's son-in-law, and said friend was then besought to use his influence with son-in-law to have the President pause in his cruise for a formal greeting. Curiously enough, as it happened, the *Amberjack II* did stop at several Maine ports, and the ambitious dignitary was allowed to pose proudly with his hand in the royal palm. But that happy event was most certainly not due to any influence of son-in-law;