

ABUSING THE INSTRUMENT

BY FRANCIS E. LEUPP

READING of an incident in the childhood of the Japanese General Nogi, I was reminded of another nearer home. Having been dedicated to the profession of arms, Nogi was taken, while still a small boy, to see a criminal decapitated, and was rebuked for shuddering at the spectacle. After night-fall, when all was darkness and silence, he was required to go alone to the burial ground and bring back the culprit's head. The ordeal was designed to strengthen his nerves and teach him to fear nothing, living or dead.

A friend once described to me an experience of his, intended to cultivate in him a sense of reverence. He could not have been more than three or four years old, and was as heedless as most children of what was due his elders. One day he was very disrespectful to an aged woman who lived near by, and refused to ask her pardon. That night she died suddenly, and the next day he was taken to see her as she lay in her coffin. There a lecture was administered to him on the wickedness of treating old persons as he had treated this one, and he was reminded that now it was too late to seek her forgiveness: death had closed forever the door of reparation.

As long as he lived he carried with him the impress of that hour. It was a dreadful thing to come into the life of a little child, although doubtless the adults responsible had only a benevolent purpose. In their eyes, my friend was an infant sinner whose heart could not be moved save by a tragic lesson.

The following night, and many another, his rest was troubled by visions of the old woman as he had seen her lying, speechless, sightless, still. Remorse preyed upon him, not because he unduly magnified his offending, but because of that inexorable decree that he should never be permitted to undo what he had done; and although with increasing years he came to look at death very differently, it was a long time before that first morbid association had worn entirely away. I dare say that only exceptionally favoring conditions prevented his suffering a revulsion of feeling which would have made him callous to the griefs of other persons when caused by bereavement, and even scornful of the great mystery itself.

I have dwelt thus on an unpleasant episode because every day we see some adult trifling with the emotional nature of a child, not realizing how like it is to a most delicate musical instrument. To the judicious touch of one who understands it, the response is harmonious and charming; struck by a rude hand, only harshness and discord result. Thrummed on carelessly and incessantly, it gradually shows the effect of wear in the dullness of its vibrations; it may simply cease to yield true tones, or it may become wholly mute.

The case of the juvenile Nogi stands by itself: the career marked out for him demanded physical fortitude and self-control as prime essentials, and his repulsive ordeal aimed not at stirring up, but at repressing, his emotions.

The experience of my friend, however, was deliberately designed to excite his imagination in a way which, in our more modern enlightenment, we know to be most unwholesome. Though I have never seen the experiment paralleled with any other child, I have repeatedly witnessed something quite as evil in its influence.

‘Good-bye, dear! Kiss grandma again. She’s getting very old, and you may not find her here when you come next time.’ This by way of farewell as the little granddaughter is starting on her homeward journey after a visit. Even putting out of consideration the pall such a thought throws over the child’s day on the road, and the haunting suggestions which becloud every memory of the leave-taking, reflect on what happens when, after two or three repetitions of the omen, grandmother continues to be found in her accustomed place with each return to the old homestead. Is the tenderest child heart-proof against the deadening effect of such frequent alternations between vague apprehension and commonplace reality?

‘I’m sorry my boy does not love his mamma any more!’ A phrase lightly used, perhaps, but with solemn face and manner, with hands spread over the eyes as if to hide mamma’s tears for her child’s defection, and repeated again and again after the little fellow has forsaken his naughty whim, professed repentance, and passionately renewed his vows of loyalty. How deficient is the mother’s estimate of the impression all this makes upon the boy! He is only a baby, she reasons, and the memory of an hour’s estrangement cannot last long with him. But that is not the point. What counts is the blunting of a fine sensibility which nature has planted in him for right use, not abuse. If that woman had a piano of rare tone, would she give it to the

children for a toy? Would she house it in a boiler-shop?

Of a different sort, yet equally pernicious, is the error of overdoing a child’s training in generosity. There is as wide a difference between generosity and unselfishness as between courage and fearlessness. It may be a comfortable trait to be destitute of fears, but it is not so fine as to have the fears, coupled with the courage to do your duty in spite of them. Likewise, while it is pleasant to be unselfish, there is no virtue in yielding to others what you yourself do not care for; all the nobility of generosity lies in having the selfish instinct but also the spirit of good will which masters it. I have seen parents train children in unselfishness by teaching them from their cradles to set no store by any of their childish treasures; as a consequence they have become, emotionally, like little wrung-out rags. The healthy child is selfish, and the training he needs is one which will not benumb his natural desires, but teach him to restrain their manifestation when he can thus give enjoyment to others.

There are parents, too, who go to the other extreme, and almost nauseate a child with delights by piling one a-top of another so that he has no chance to digest any of them. I have seen a Christmas festival almost turned into an occasion of mourning by following a deluge of gifts with a dinner of dainties and an evening at the circus. One half the presents, a matinée performance, a simple repast, and the hour or two before bed-time passed in an unexciting atmosphere, would have given the child more solid pleasure, and left him unsated and ready to put fresh zest into the morrow. Another form of the same mistake is where a child is playing in perfect content with one toy, yet the mother tosses it another from time to time. Its enjoyment is inter-

rupted, its interest distracted, and its cravings multiplied, all by her well-meant but thoughtless interference.

In these days, intelligent persons everywhere condemn such cruelties as the ghost and bogey stories which nurses used to tell children to make them lie quiet after the lights were out; but not a few who denounce this practice are nevertheless willing to amuse themselves by making some extravagant statement to a child in order to witness his wide-eyed amazement, and then its collapse when the narrator confesses that the whole thing is a joke. And here I suppose more than one reader is exclaiming, 'Would you have us forego all intercourse with our children except on the most matter-of-fact plane? Are we to avoid any form of reproof which sharply spurs their sensibilities? May we not jest with them as we do with other people? And if we are to stick always to the literal truth, what is to become of Santa Claus and the fairies?'

This is begging the question. There are calm, dignified ways of impressing a child's consciousness, without turning his mind into a chamber of horrors. You can introduce him even to the solemnity of death without exciting either his fears or his repugnance. You can bring him to a penitential frame without refusing to kiss him good-night, or pretending to believe that he has lost all his affection for you. Your fun with your adult friend is not confined to playing on his credulity and then letting him down suddenly to the hard ground of fact; then why depend on such a resource with your child, who is not so capable as your friend of seeing

through your tricks of speech? The pleasant little romance of Santa Claus, typifying the universal Christmas spirit, is no more an offense against truth than such an allegory as the *Pilgrim's Progress*. It involves no severe emotional strain at the start, no violent reaction later; indeed, with the gradual expansion of his reasoning powers, the child works out for himself, first the improbabilities, and then the impossibilities, in the myth. As for fairy tales, there is of course a wide choice between them; but such classics as *Cinderella* and *The Three Wishes* are, like the Parables, mere fanciful garments clothing certain ethical verities.

In short, your aim should be to prove to your children that you are one rock of sincerity to which they may cling with implicit assurance. Till maturity and experience have fortified them against the ordinary vicissitudes of life, you should protect their emotional natures as you would protect a perfectly attuned harp. Appeal to their reason where you can, issue arbitrary commands where you must, but hold their emotions sacred. Not even a lesson in virtue should be emphasized by forcing these into unnatural activity or playing on them all the time. Contact with the busy world will in due course produce its dulling effect upon your children's susceptibilities. They will learn that sometimes pretense mounts to high places and false sentiment usurps the rule of sense; but do not add to these sordid revelations the shock of a lost faith in you, which will surely follow your abuse of the responsive instrument placed in their breasts for a wise and sparing use.

VAN CLEVE AND HIS FRIENDS

BY MARY S. WATTS

CHAPTER XIX (*continued*)

IN WHICH MR. KENDRICK PUTS HIS
FOOT DOWN

No small amount of water has gone under the bridges since then, and Van Cleve has changed a good deal; by my count, he must be nearly forty years of age at the present date of nineteen hundred and twelve; but he has looked forty ever since he was twenty-five, so that now, for an oddity, he seems younger rather than older! And it was with a start that I heard him the other day allude to the time when he was 'a young fellow at the National Loan and Savings Bank'; that organization has been dead and buried so long, as we measure nowadays. Yet, as I say, Van has changed a good deal; he is much more genial and companionable than he used to be; he takes life easier, possibly because it *is* easier than when he was a hard, silent, care-laden boy, driving himself to the limit. Once in a while, he will even cast back to that time, not with any soft feeling of pity or sympathy for that earlier self, but in a mood of tolerance, wonder, and perhaps a little complacency. 'I had one of those chances that come to a man once in a lifetime, and I knew it too, but I did n't have the courage to take advantage of it,' he said to me on this same occasion, with a trace of the humorous pride he might have taken in the exploits of a son. And he told me about it.

Van Cleve has never learned the art

of polite small-talk; he will not change in that respect if he lives to be a hundred, and this anecdote represents his notion of conversation with a lady. 'It was back in ninety-six,' he said. 'You remember the Democratic National Convention that year? Remember the "crown of thorns and cross of gold"? Yes, but what you probably don't remember or may not have known at the time is that the stock market was very uneasy just then. Standard Oil went back from three hundred and something to less than two hundred. I was a young fellow at the bank then; I had been there four or five years, and I had four hundred dollars saved up; and ordinarily I'd have thought of buying on the stock market about as soon as I'd have thought of buying the Mammoth Cave for a speculation. But after I read that Chicago speech, I said to myself: "This fellow is either another Abraham Lincoln, or — or he is n't. Now he's going to make a speech in New York, and we'll find out." Well, he went to New York and he made the speech, do you remember? At Madison Square Garden, I believe; and I went out and got a copy of the paper the minute it was out, and read it.'

'Well?' said I, a little at sea, as he paused. I do not know much about politics or the stock market, one or the other, and for the life of me cannot understand the connection there seems to be between them.

'Well, he was n't Abraham Lincoln,' said Van Cleve, with a slight smile; 'I