

THE CONTRIBUTORS' CLUB

COMMENTS BY ONE OF THE NEIGHBORS

YES, the Grundy family next door is having another tantrum. The elders have been screaming out of the second-story windows for a considerable period, till at last little Johnnie Grundy rises from his mud-pies and screams back at them to stick their silly heads inside and finish their knitting. All immensely edifying to the neighbors — of whose existence the Grundys are, of course, totally unaware. But though our loud-shouting fellow citizens in the big house do not know us, we, the neighbors, do exist; and we are especially numerous among readers of the *Atlantic*. It is not unnatural, then, that a few whispered comments should break upon the momentary silence which follows little Johnnie's well-chosen words.

These Grundys are undoubtedly a problem. In our most unsympathetic mood we find them inexpressibly funny, with their frantic, anxious, yet uniformly successful attempts at educating the young saphead to resemble the old bonehead. At times they are merely maddening, as when their dying struggle against hypocrisy splashes mud all over everything. Occasionally they get to be an acute menace, and come very near wrecking the world entirely; for it is the Grundys who preach and worship sanctity of property, and doctrines that have just killed some millions of people.

A while ago I saw a youthful member of our own family who cast a great light on the problem by a 'recapitulation' of adolescent Grunditude. This youngster, aged three, lay kicking on the floor and yelled at the top of his

voice, 'I'm *not* a baby, I'm a GREAT BIG MAN!' Little Johnnie's highly pertinent comments on his elders are but cleverly elaborated expansions of the same idea. These two qualities of the undeveloped human — a tendency to become frantic and a total unconsciousness of his own absurdity — are, normally, conspicuous only during the first dozen years of life; by the time he has reached maturity, a healthy person has usually discovered that he is personally a fit object of mirth, and might as well enjoy it.

The Grundys, however, are people whose development has been arrested. Like other backward strains in the race, they represent a more primitive ethnic type, persisting by survival or reversion in a cultural environment which demands a higher evolutionary product. The lack of a sense of humor characteristic of all true Grundys, old or young, is only one obvious symptom of a far-reaching defect of development. It is part of a sort of delusion of grandeur, involving a conviction of knowledge of Life and of personal rightness and authority. Whether it is the philosophic Fitz solemnly assuring the world that he knows himself (and is therefore in full possession and control of the *omphalos* of the universe), or some older Grundy insisting upon the necessity of an orthodox creed, or the Wild Young Un who is so busy selling wallpaper or equally valuable oil stocks that he has to snatch his rosebuds between ten P.M. and four in the morning — all the tribe of Grundy have in common this solemn childlike sense of their own importance. Whether round-eyed and innocent, or dirtily naughty, or bully-

ingly authoritative, they are all more or less grown-up children in a children's world. It is only in the last few thousand years, of course, that the world has become too complex for the Grundys. During the long childhood of the race their spirit was in full control. Conformity was the first duty of man, and he conformed or was eliminated. Since the time when the nonconformist got out of hand, and began the long upward struggle toward civilization, the more ancient strain has had an unhappy history; but it has never been destroyed or put entirely out of power. Through all the generations it has handed down to posterity the categorical imperative with its clan-destine consequences, and the creed of the Fathers with its accompanying insincerities, and the code of the gentleman upheld by the double standard and the conspiracy of silence. Latterly the Grundy plan of salvation has been more than usually disastrous. Their conception of patriotism was carried to its logical conclusion by the obedient Germans, who followed the flag to a bad end. Before, during, and since that catastrophe, Grundyized Christianity has been adding its own modest contribution to the pile of victims. Some sort of religion, it is fair to say, is indispensable to any sane life; there are plenty of people of my acquaintance, Americans and Europeans, who have thrown their religion overboard because someone had attached it to a creed that had to go.

Whether it was the war, or the denaturing of Christianity by so many centuries of orthodoxy, or only our old friend Zeitgeist, something has certainly made the young Grundys more than ordinarily unruly. There is no sign of their leaving the family. How often a gay young debutante will say to a neighborly bystander: 'We're raising Cain all right, but just wait till the next generation tries anything like this

on us!' It is part of their frankness to recognize the mature Grundihood awaiting them; but meanwhile they insist on what seems to them a new order of things. They are all for open high jinks openly arrived at. Instead of the folly and conventionality of their ancestors, they will substitute folly without conventionality, and so bring in the dawn of a new age. With tremors of joy they dip into Freud and discover the self-regarding instincts and the newly risen Aphrodite. The reason they are not impressed with that other instinct, of adjustment to reality, is quite simple. The arrest of development to which the Grundy strain owes its origin has occurred just before the functional maturity of this very instinct.

Obviously, then, for us neighbors to preach to the folks next door would be wasted energy. We can rescue such of their victims as are within reach, and do our bit toward undermining the Grundy influence where we can. But mostly we shall be usefully occupied in fortifying ourselves against any contagion from their side of the fence. In a mad and devastated world our accidental sanity and equally accidental good-fortune are sufficiently evident. We have healthy children, our wives (one each) enjoy our society, we don't thirst for anybody's blood, and we are able to laugh joyfully at ourselves and everybody else. We suffer from various things, and we have some of us been shot at by Germans and bitten by cooties; but from time to time the sun does shine on us. We are not optimists, for the world is infested with Grundys, and they have without doubt already made a wonderful mess of it. But we do know a few cheerful facts to shelter us from the cold winds. The number of people who are fairly adjusted to reality is encouraging. Wherever we go there are more sane, vividly alive personalities than we can find time to

enjoy: at least, we are not a tiny remnant fighting with our backs to the wall; but part of an increasingly large minority. Though we can't answer all the riddles of life, or avoid being often foolish and sometimes unrighteous, yet we can and do make a reasonable success of the job of living. The love of God is no dogma to us; we know plenty of people who have it in them. The joy of friendship is more real to us than clothes or money; and love, as we know, is more than poor old prurient Freud ever heard of.

While the neighbors, then, fight over the conflict of old conventions and new follies, we may as well hold the fort, and take what comfort we can in the joy of life, true friendship, true love, and happy laughter. It would be a fine thing to save the world, if we could; but evolution is too slow to allow us much hope of Utopia for a while. Still, at least we may find and enjoy the large red strawberries which — all Grundys to the contrary notwithstanding — do grow in the woods for those who know where to look.

STONES

Democritus, in the 154th Fragment of his *Golden Sayings*, says, 'In matters of great weight, go to school with the animals. Learn spinning and weaving from the spider, architecture from the swallow, singing from the swan and the nightingale.'

This is the sort of advice our forefathers were always wont to give. When they saw a sluggard, they sent him to the ant; when they saw a popinjay, they sent him to the worm; when they saw a buffoon, they sent him to the cow; when they saw a fool, they sent him to the owl. All animate nature took on special characters; peacocks were vain, foxes were cunning, bears were ugly, dogs were lazy, sheep were stupid,

oxen were patient, cats were sly, serpents were wise. We began to live in an endless La Fontaine fable. Not even the plants were exempt from this strange psychology, and violets seemed modest, lilies pure, roses passionate, and snowdrops brave.

But how curious it is that we should have confined our lyric encomiums to the animate kingdoms. Living though they be, they are not one half so full of lovable qualities as the realm that is considered cold and stern — the mineral.

We have all had kittens and puppies for playmates. Mr. Hudson prefers a pig. Gautier — or was it Gérard de Nerval? — tenderly led a lobster through the boulevards of Paris. Isabella nursed her pot of basil; Louise her geranium. Life began, according to the Hebraic legend, in a garden, and it was an apple tree with whose fruit was seriously involved the destiny of the human race.

But how substanceless was that demand. We have tried to make friends with living things, and to no end. They really have very little use for us. We cajole them with food, we kill them with kindness, and we never understand them. Leave these pets but a day, and they will return to the wild. Even plants care nothing for us in a profound way. As soon as we cease our gracious ministrations, they revert to a jungle.

Nothing is so depressing as to walk in the country and see the animals flee at one's approach. Even the fish scuttle away as soon as man's shadow darkens the water. The lumbering cattle shuffle off. The rabbits prefer a semblance of death to the chance of making our acquaintance. The birds whirl up from the grasses in flocks and fly as far off as possible.

I look forward to the time when man shall himself turn from this social climbing into families which want none