

THE SHY FATHERS

BY Y. Y.

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It is difficult to refuse a child's invitation, even when it is to attend the breaking-up ceremony at a school. At first I pleaded shyness; but my little niece said with a pout, 'That's what all the men say. Elizabeth says her father's shy, but she's simply going to make him come; and Ann's father says *he's* too shy, but Ann's going to make him come, too. Why should all the fathers be shy?' 'I don't know anything about the fathers,' I told her; 'I can only answer for the uncles.' 'Well, why should uncles be shy?'

That, I confess, bowled me out. 'Oh, well,' I said, 'I'll come along with the shy fathers.'

I admit I should not have gone if I had not been sure that the shy fathers would have been there in considerable numbers. The thought of being present in a large schoolroom, with no other man present, in the midst of a throng of far from shy women and children, I find terrifying to the imagination. It is not that I dislike the company of women and children: on the whole, I think it is the best company in the world. But, as Bacon has said, a crowd is not company, and the loneliness of a man entirely surrounded by women and children surpasses even the loneliness of a man who finds himself alone in the middle of the Sahara.

Apart from this, however, I think there are several reasons for the shyness of fathers when they are pressed by their children to go to a breaking-up party at school. The average father, I suspect, is afraid of what his children's

school friends may think of him. He knows that, by the grace of God, his own children do not see him as he is at all. They play games with him as with an equal. They laugh at least at some of his jokes. They appear at times to regard him as the richest, the bravest, and the cleverest man in the world. Has not one boasted of one's own father? I remember at the age of eight boasting to a bosom friend of the same age that my father was a multimillionaire. He had boastfully said that his father had a million pounds. I said that my father had three. And, for all I knew, it might have been true.

A child, indeed, is reluctant to believe that there may be fathers in the world superior in every way to its own. A friend of mine, an occasional writer of mediocre verse, was referring to some story about Blake the other day, when his ten-year-old daughter interrupted him to ask who Blake was. 'Oh, he was a genius' wrote "Tiger, tiger," said her father. 'Was he as big a genius as you?' inquired the little girl. 'Good gracious, you must n't call me a genius,' he told her. 'I think you are,' she said, gently but firmly. 'Why,' he explained the situation, 'I could n't write "Tiger, tiger," if I lived to be a thousand.' 'I would rather have "Oh, Bonar, Bonar, why thus dishonor?"' she told him, quoting the first line of a set of perfectly atrocious political verses he had written.

Of such is the kingdom of Heaven. I do not, I may say, suggest that a father never sees the little waves of

criticism stealing into his child's face, or that he has any reason to fear that his child is likely, for any long period of time, to mistake him for a god. He knows that the process of finding him out may be a slow one, but that it is cumulative and that it is sure. But he also knows that his child, as a rule, over-estimates him in a way in which no other child would. That is why, when he is asked to submit himself to the critical eyes of his children's school-fellows, he feels suddenly shy and apprehensive. No man may be able to add a cubit to his stature, but he has an uneasy suspicion that the eyes of other people's children may be able to take several cubits off.

Even so, I do not think that it is any injury to his own vanity that the shy father fears. After all, if other people's children do not like him, he can always avenge himself by disliking them twice as bitterly. It is really on his children's account that he feels shy. Being sentimental, he feels — or pretends to feel — that he is utterly unworthy to be the father of such wonderful children, and he shrinks from saddling them with such a second-rate parent in presence of their friends. He must look, he tells himself, an odd sort of fish; and though, heaven knows, all the other fathers of his acquaintance look as odd sorts of fish as you could wish to meet, still he does not like the notion of an odd sort of fish being seen in public as the father of these particular children. He would hate to see his children going to school in ridiculous clothes: he hates equally the thought of their going to school equipped with a ridiculous parent.

There is, I am told, no greater happiness known on earth than that of a father who, after a party to which his children's school friends have been invited, can lie back in his chair and tell himself that he did not behave so badly

after all. It is always pleasant to pass an examination, but there is no examination which it is a more blessed relief to pass than an examination by one's children's friends. Fathers have told me of the nervousness they have seen in their children on such occasions — of the impatient expression they have observed on the little face that, at a joke that has no point or that has a point that nobody is able to see, tells them of the silent soliloquy: 'Daddy being silly again!' Pity the tremors of children for their fathers. Pity the tremors of fathers for themselves.

Happy is the child whose father acquits himself with credit in the presence of its friends. How delightful it was in one's childhood to see one's own father being a success in such trying circumstances! One cheered in one's soul as he, habitually a silent man, awoke out of his silence into the most fascinating conversationalist in the world, made jokes that were good jokes, and told stories of his experiences that were better than a book. There was no personal triumph to surpass the triumph of having such a father as this. To see the faces of one's friends brightening, made, I am sure, one's own face bright.

Some children, on the other hand, even children who are devoted to their fathers, accustom themselves from an early age to the knowledge that their fathers are imperfect creatures whose faults must be put up with as the decree of destiny. I knew one boy whose father, an excellent and interesting man, had the one fault of talking too much and of telling a story at twice the length at which it ought to have been told. The boy never showed the slightest irritation, as many boys would have done. When the father had lost his bearings in the middle of an apparently endless anecdote, the boy would merely say, with a smile, 'Ring off, governor!'

and turn the conversation to another subject.

I cannot say that I set out for the school with any intention of making my small niece proud of me, but I was buoyed up by the hope that I would not actually disgrace her.

To see a play performed by small children, with a few footlights arranged on the floor in imitation of a theatre, is to feel that all that the saints have said about children is true. How exquisite are their voices that are all music without the harshness of experience! To listen to them is like listening to the first birds.

The feeling may not be a deep one, and may be only for the moment; but, for the time at least, we wish with a pang that life could always have remained like this, that nobody would ever grow up or die, but that the very kings and admirals and prime ministers and thieves and shopkeepers were all children.

After all, the gray-haired and the bald play their parts in almost as complete innocence of what they are doing as these children, who at least know that it is all a game. And, indeed, the contrast between a child of twelve and a grown-up human being is scarcely greater than the contrast between a child of five or six and a child of twelve. I had never realized the enormous gap between six and twelve till a band of little six-year-old dancers came on to the stage with solemn feet and solemn faces and went through their steps in the middle of a half-circle of girls, none of whom were older than twelve and none younger than ten. Kings, Puritans, cavaliers, mackerel-sellers, and cutpurses of twelve seemed six feet high in comparison with these midget elves. They, too, seemed infinitely small and of a perfect age when they were on the stage alone, but the children of six had only to appear in order

to let us see that there was an age still nearer perfection.

Not that I should care to be dogmatic on this point. It may be only a passing ripple of sentimentalism that makes one wish that all the world were of so doll-like a stature as this, and that the very editor of the *Times* were a little fellow of six. There are others, perhaps, who would regard the little elf of six as a giant compared to the sleeping infant in the cradle — the infant in the comet stage, as Meredith saw it. The child in the cradle is, for many people, the eternal Sleeping Beauty, and, if one may judge by religious art, it is the age that to men of imagination has seemed most divine.

I confess I am content with six — nay, with seven, or eight, or nine, or ten, or eleven, or twelve. And perhaps there may be something to be said for any age up to sixteen, or even twenty, or, at a stretch, thirty; and if you advance the age to forty I shall not quarrel with you. There is, within these limits, no year that would not be better if it lasted at least three years; but I am not sure that, at the age of six, a year should not last ten.

It may be, of course, that if all these children, six and twelve alike, had not been doomed to grow old, I should not have been so moved at the spectacle of their grace and the sweet sound of their voices. And if I myself had remained at their age I might only have squabbled and seen some of them not as angels but with a hostile eye. Hence all may be for the best in the best of all possible worlds, and it may be that to be an uncle appears as wonderful a destiny to a little girl of ten as to be a little girl of ten seems to an uncle. In any case I shall tell my niece that I think the perfect age is not six, but ten. An uncle has only one duty — to make himself popular with his nephews and nieces.

A PAGE OF VERSE

FROM THE GREEK ANTHOLOGY

BY A. C. BENSON

[*The Reed of Pan*]

LORD of the Harbor, remember and
hearken,

Guard Archelaus in perilous seas.
Let not the flying wrack gather and
darken,
Send a calm tide and a favoring breeze.

Lord of the Headland, with prayers
unavailing

Grant us not vainly thy grace to
implore,
Guard thou the convoy that soon shall
be sailing,
Ships that are bound to the Pythian
shore.

Singers, the servants and sons of Apollo,
Ye are his care who obey his behest;
Fair be your fortune, up anchor, and
follow,
Cheerily follow the winds of the west.

TUTANKHAMEN

BY JOHN DRINKWATER

[*Public Opinion*]

A BEGGAR walked in front of me,
In ribboned rags, disastrously;

Mopping the puddled rain with pads
Long worn in guttered Iliads.

Halting, with eyes downcast, intent
Upon the splashing stones he went.

He heard me, and with lifted head
Waited my coming, as I said,

To ask an alms; but, as he turned,
His eyes with distant glory burned.

He did not ask an alms; he held
A finger up, and I was spelled.

He did not ask an alms; he said,
'The ancient honors all are sped.

'The ancient honors are all gone
That founded Rome and Babylon.

'These rags were once Arabia's boast;
I was a king, and am a ghost.

'The lifting of my hand was doom;
In Egypt they have found my tomb.'

He went, a beggar man again,
Into the shadows and the rain.

DELIA'S FAITH

BY RICHARD ALDINGTON

[*To-Day*]

Go tell the shepherd's star, when first
The evening fans her spark awake,
That light is murderous and accurst —
But say not Delia's faith can break.

Tell the wild rose, when tranquil days
Have charmed a thousand petals wide,
To-morrow scatters all her praise —
But say not Delia's kisses lied.

Swear anything that's monstrous, swear
That truth is a fantastic lie,
Take oath that Delia is not fair —
But oh, that she is false, deny.

FROM THE GREEK ANTHOLOGY

BY WALTER LEAF

[*Little Poems from the Greek: Second Series*]

GIVE me a mattress in the poop,
An awning round to catch the swoop
Of plashing, rattling sprays,
A stove of bricks with flame aglow,
A pot a-boil, where gurgling low
The empty bubbles play;

The cabin-boy to serve the meal
In napkin spread on deck of deal,
The skipper piping loud,
A game of pitch and toss to play —
Such luck was mine the other day;
I love the simple crowd.