

His Majesty Baby

A Winsome Tale of Conquest, by Ian Maclaren in "The British Weekly"

UNTIL the 'bus stopped and the old gentleman entered we had been a contented and genial company, travelling from a suburb into the city in high good fellowship, and our absolute monarch was Baby. His mother was evidently the wife of a well-doing artisan, a wise-looking, capable, bonnie young woman; and Baby was not a marvel of attire, nor could he be called beautiful. He was dressed after a careful, tidy, comfortable fashion, and he was a clear-skinned, healthy child; that is all you would have noticed had you met the two on the street.

In a 'bus where there is nothing to do for forty minutes except stare into one another's faces, a baby has the great chance of his life, and this baby was made to seize it. He was not hungry, and there were no pins about his clothes, and nobody had made him afraid, and he was by nature a human soul. So he took us in hand one by one till he had reduced us all to a state of delighted subjection, to the pretended scandal and secret pride of his mother.

His first conquest was easy, and might have been discounted, for against such an onset there was no power of resistance in the elderly woman opposite—one of the lower middles, fearfully stout, and of course a grandmother. He simply looked at her—if he smiled, that was thrown in—for, without her knowledge, her arms had begun to shape for his reception—so often had children lain on that ample resting-place. "Bless 'is little 'eart; it do me good to see 'im." No one cared to criticise the words, and we remarked to ourselves how the expression changes the countenance. Not heavy and red, far less dull, the proper adjective for that face is motherly.

The next passenger, just above Grannie, is a lady, young and pretty, and a mother? Of course; did you not see her look Baby over, as an expert at her sharpest? The mother is conscious of inspection, and adjusts a ribbon His Majesty had tossed aside, and then she meekly awaited approval. For a moment we were anxious, but that was our foolishness, for in half a minute the lady's face relaxed, and she passed Baby. She leaned forward and asked questions, and we overheard scraps of technical detail: "My first . . . fourteen months . . . six teeth . . . always well." One was a lady, the other a working woman; they had not met before, they were not likely to meet again, but they had forgotten strangeness and differences in the common bonds of motherhood. Opposite me a priest was sitting and saying his office, but at this point his eye fell on the mothers, and I thought his lips shaped the words "Sancta Maria" before he went on with the appointed portion.

Baby had wearied of inaction and had begun another campaign, and my heart sank, for this time he courted defeat. On the other side of

Grannie and within Baby's sphere of influence was a man about whose profession there could be little doubt, even if he had not a bag on his knee and were not reading from a parchment document. After a long and serious consideration of the lawyer's clear-cut, clean-shaven, and bloodless face, Baby leaned forward and tapped gently on the deed, and then, when the keen face looked up in keen enquiry, Baby replied with a smile of roguish intelligence, as if to say, "By the way, that parchment would make an excellent drum; do you mind me—? A tune has just come into my head."

The lawyer, of course, drew away the deed, and frowned at the insolence of the thing. No, he did not—there is a soul in lawyers if you know how to find it. He smiled. Well, it was not a first-rate smile, but it was genuine, and



"HIS MAJESTY."

the next time he did it better, and afterwards it spread all over his face and lighted up his eyes. He had never been exposed in such a genial, irresistible way before, and so he held the drum, and Baby played a variation on "Rule Britannia" with much spirit, while Grannie appealed for applause: "If he don't play as well as the band in 'yde Park of a Sunday."

After a well-deserved rest of forty seconds, during which we wagged our heads in wonder, Baby turned his attention to his right-hand neighbor, and, for the balance of the minute, examined her with compassion. An old maid without question, with her disposition written on the thin lips, and the hard grey eyes. None of us would care to trifle with her. Will he dare! If he has not! That was his chief stroke of genius, and it deserved success—when, with an expression of unaffected pity, he put out his soft,