

can it be regretted, that their reason, immature at present and ill prepared to enter into the strife of opinions, should be naturally disposed to attach itself to the guides, placed within reach by Providence, and to submit to them almost implicitly.

Again children have a quick and intuitive sense of character. They are skilful to read its hieroglyphics in the look, voice, manner, and general appearance. They feel themselves unaccountably attracted or repelled by the different persons with whom they are brought into contact; and these prepossessions seldom prove mistaken. They are great hero worshippers. Virtue to them is no lifeless abstraction—no “*bona res*”—nor yet a frigid and decorous personification. To find a way into their hearts, she must appear like the gods of Homer,—in the real flesh and blood of some great and good man. As soon as they begin to be initiated into the busy controversies of the political world, they become violent partisans. With the party to which they are attached, resides all right and goodness: out of its pale are aliens and foes. Castles in the air, beautiful and unsubstantial, “rise like an exhalation;” or “like the airy fabric of a dream,” doomed, alas, “to melt away before the light of common day.” Cherished theories of Utopian perfection, and the eager pursuit of unattainable ends, lure on the willing dupe; until, as years pass away, tired of the hopeless chase, he learns to understand that to strive after good, rather than to attain it, is the portion allotted to man by God in this life.

It may be added that children are little, if at all, affected by worldly considerations in choosing their friends. Rank and riches are nothing to them, in comparison with real personal attractions. Tuffhunting, or “flunkeyism,” as it is now called, too often the bane of society, among the grown up children of the world, is almost, if not utterly, unknown at school. Prowess at cricket or football—feats of bodily strength and activity—deeds of “pluck” and hardihood—the value of qualifications like these may be overrated at school; but, after all, the higher excellencies of generosity, kindness and candour, never fail to be appreciated there. The self-aggrandizing spirit, which torments men in after years with a constant anxiety to form “good connexions,” is powerless to infuse its base alloy into the genuine affection of early friendship.

Very heedless of consequences they often are—and scarcely familiar enough with pain and suffering by their own experience to estimate rightly what they are inflicting; but they must be acquitted of anything like intentional or deliberate cruelty. Their “love of mischief” is in the main an experimentalizing curiosity. Another accusation, brought against them—it occurs in a book full of thoughtful advice on the subject of education, “*Early Influences*,” by Mrs. Montgomery—is, that they are not naturally truthful. It might have been supposed that, if anywhere, truth would delight to dwell in so pure an abode as the breast of little children. It would be difficult to connect the idea of falsity with their artless simplicity. The fact is, they have a strong innate sense of the badness of a lie: but the timidity and shrinking from pain inseparable from a tender age, easily avail to overpower the natural propensity to truth. Thus an appearance of insincerity is produced. A similar explanation might be applied to the national character of the Italians and Hindoos. Reserved, except to the few who understand them, children are very liable to sudden gusts of changefulness, but they are not often deceitful nor untrue.

The peculiarities of the mysterious stage of human life which we have been contemplating thus show that it is almost impossible to overrate the importance of children's books. So subtle and imperceptible is the influence of external circumstances on the inner life—so mysteriously are the links in the chain of progression inter dependent that scarcely the autobiographer himself can say positively how far the colour of his whole life betrays the dye first imparted to it in the incidental associations of childhood, and ever afterwards retained. But the coral bed is day by day acquiring bulk and coherence, while the waters pass idly to and fro above the invisible workmen of the deep. What now appears so insignificant will one day rise solid and compact above the surface;—perchance a gallant vessel shall founder there; perchance it shall become a very fertile land. So it is with the hidden growth of character. Nature supplies the raw material—the innate taste and capacity. This or that book, accidentally encountered perhaps, and devoured with the keenness of a youthful appetite, serves to kindle the slumbering energies with a Promethean spark. The gallant sailor may receive the first impulse that launches him on his perilous and glorious career from the fabled adventures of *Crusoe*, or the graphic narratives of Anson and Drake and Byron, which he read when a boy. The young imagination of another has feasted over the tales of Bagdad and Balsora, on luscious descriptions of the treasures of the East, or mused on the daring and successful enterprise of merchant princes in the Indies, and the result has been a life of commercial speculation. In a third the seeds of military glory have been sown by reading of Knight or Paladin, and in due time they have borne fruit. Sir Walter Scott is an instance. The tales and legends that pleased his childish fancy, though thrust aside for a time by less palatable occupations, never lost their charm, but remained with him to the last. The greatest events of history, the fate of dynasties and nations, the master-

works of art, the grandest discoveries that have signalized the march of mankind on the highroad of civilization, might thus be found to issue from some “child's book.”

And yet it is often deemed an easy and trivial thing to write for children. Books about children it is comparatively easy to write: but it is not so easy to penetrate the secret of youthful sympathies, to captivate them and hold them fast. It is not for every harper, says the Welsh proverb, to play upon the harp of many strings. As it is, while “books for children” are innumerable, the number of really good works of this sort—skilfully adapted to meet the wants of their happy thoughtless life, is small indeed. Childhood to many persons is a sealed book, and remains so always.

It follows from what has been already said on the characteristics of children, that it is a great mistake to take pains to write down to the supposed level of their capacities. The fact is, that most children, if not all, are very fond of pondering with themselves the deepest and most awful subjects. The guesses of intuition not unfrequently hit the truth, just as a woman is generally right until she begins to give her reasons. So it is often with children. The wonders of the natural world—of earth and sea and sky—nay, even the mysterious questions,\* which all the acquired knowledge of manhood is incompetent to answer satisfactorily, of fate, freewill, sin, happiness, eternity; infinite and perplexing questions of this kind—

Blank misgivings of a creature  
Moving about in worlds not realized—

have a strange fascination for children. We do not mean to say that it is well to indulge the proneness towards such speculations unreservedly. But the mere fact that children find pleasure in them, shews an extent of rational curiosity and sympathy larger than is usually imputed to their age. Those who have forgotten their own childhood, and who do not care to study the ways of boys, do not know what profound aspirations are often at work within their little heads. In the infancy of Greek philosophy, when the Ionian mind, inquisitive and inexperienced as that of a child, first essayed to construct a system of the universe, it plunged into every department of philosophy; material, moral, metaphysical, at once, and mingled all together in a grotesque theological confusion. A similar process is often going on in children. There is scarcely any height or depth in thought out of the reach of their curious inquiries. In experience and method, of course they are deficient. But the reason, as distinguished by Kant and Coleridge from the understanding, already asserts its unity with that of the great human family.

Children are generally very good judges whether a book is written in good taste or bad. They have a great deal of reverence and reserve, and a wondering admiration of everything remarkable. As soon as it is laid bare by a thorough explanation and stripped of all its mystery, it loses interest for them. Perpetual explanations are not only unnecessary for them, but wearisome and distasteful. They gain more real and lasting instruction from partial glimpses,—half revealing, half suggesting, gradually leading onwards to truth in its fulness, not exposing it all at once, supplying the mind meanwhile with abundant food for meditation, than by the uninviting glare of a complete illumination.

It is a drawback from the great merit of the late Mrs. Sherwood's style of writing for children, that she too much seeks to lower things to the supposed tenuity of their understandings, by way of making everything plain and easy for them. But they do not love so meagre a diet for their imagination and dawning reason. The Athenian philosopher, of whom it has been truly said that he taught the world as one would a little child, well knew the magnetic power that resides in a teaching *suggestive* rather than *exhaustive*, in which truth is implied rather than expressed. A proverb in use among his own countrymen who told him that “half is more than the whole.” And if we look for guidance to the highest example of instruction—one greater and holier far than Socrates or any human teacher—we cannot fail to observe how content he was that his words should remain only understood in part for a while, until the growing capacity of his hearers should enlarge itself to the measure of their full significance.

We have already remarked that children are naturally disposed to receive undisputingly the teaching which proceeds from what they regard as good authority. The tone of assertion, the unhesitating tone of strong belief, has more weight with them than the most ingenious argumentative discussion. It seems intended by nature that it should be so; and for obvious reasons. Now, this habit of mind evidently requires dogmatic rather than controversial writing. But after all, we must add, that some of these books by Mrs. Sherwood are among the most popular of books for children. They are too well known to require any particular description. The most pleasant early associa-

\* I never gathered from infidel writers, when an avowed infidel myself, any solid difficulties which were not brought to my mind by a very young child of my own. “Why was sin permitted?” “What a very small word this is to be saved by the incarnation and death of the Son of God!” “Who can believe that so few will be saved?”—*Remains of Rev. E. Cecil.*