

ON BABIES.

BY J. K. JEROME.

Oh yes, I do—I know a lot about 'em. I was one myself once—though not long, not so long as my clothes. They were very long, I recollect, and always in my way when I wanted to kick. Why do babies have such yards of unnecessary clothing? It is not a riddle. I really want to know. I never could understand it. Is it that the parents are ashamed of the size of the child, and wish to make believe that it is longer than it actually is? I asked a nurse once why it was. She said:

"Lor', sir, they always have long clothes, bless their little hearts."

And when I explained that her answer, although doing credit to her feelings, hardly disposed of my difficulty, she replied:

"Lor', sir, you wouldn't have 'em in short clothes, poor little dears?" And she said it in a tone that seemed to imply I had suggested some unmanly outrage.

Since then, I have felt shy at making inquiries on the subject, and the reason—if reason there be—is still a mystery to me. But, indeed, putting them in any clothes at all seems absurd to my mind. Goodness knows, there is enough of dressing and undressing to be gone through in life, without beginning it before we need; and one would think that people who live in bed might, at all events, be spared the torture. Why wake the poor little wretches up in the morning to take one lot of clothes off, fix another lot on, and put them to bed again; and then, at night, haul them out once more, merely to change everything back? And when all is done, what difference is there, I should like to know, between a baby's night-shirt and the thing it wears in the day-time?

A man—an unmarried man, that is—never seen to such disadvantage as when undergoing the ordeal of "seeing baby."

The bell is rung, and somebody sent to tell nurse to bring baby down. This is a signal for all the females present to commence talking "baby," during which time, you are left to your own sad thoughts, and the speculations upon the practicability of suddenly recollecting an important engagement, and the likelihood of your being believed if you do. Just when you have concocted an absurdly implausible tale about a man outside, the door opens, and a tall, severe-looking woman enters, carrying what at first sight appears to be a particularly skinny bolster, with the feathers all at one end. Instinct, however, tells you that this is the baby, and you rise with a miserable attempt at being eager. When the first gush of feminine enthusiasm with which the object in question is received has died out, and the number of ladies talking at once has been reduced to the ordinary four or five, the circle of fluttering petticoats divides, and room is made for you to step forward. This you do, and feeling unutterably miserable, you stand solemnly staring at the child. There is dead silence, and you know that every one is waiting for you to speak. You try to think of something to say, but find, to your horror, that your reasoning faculties have left you. It is a moment of despair, and your evil genius, seizing the opportunity, suggests to you some of the most idiotic remarks that it is possible for a human being to perpetrate. Glancing round with an imbecile smile, you sniggeringly observe that "It hasn't got much hair, has it?" Nobody answers you for a minute, but at last the stately nurse says with much gravity—"It is not custom-ary for children five weeks old to have long hair." Another silence follows this, and you feel you are being given a second chance, which you avail yourself of by inquiring if it can walk yet, or what they feed it on.

By this time, you have got to be regarded as not quite right in your head, and pity is the only thing felt for you. The nurse, however, is determined that, insane or not, there shall be no shirking, and that you shall go through your task to the end. In the tones of a high priestess, directing some religious mystery, she says, holding the bundle towards you, "Take her in your arms, sir." You are too crushed to offer any resistance, and so meekly accept the burden. "Put your arm more down her middle, sir," says the high priestess, and then all step back and watch you intently as though you were going to do a trick with it.

What to do you know no more than you did what to say. It is certain something must be done, however, and the only thing that occurs to you is to heave the unhappy infant up and down to the accompaniment of "oopsee-daisy," or some remark of equal intelligence. "I wouldn't jig her, sir, if I were you," says the nurse; "a very little upsets her." You promptly decide not to jig her, and sincerely hope that you have not gone too far already.

At this point, the child itself, who has hitherto been regarding you with an expression of mingled horror and disgust, puts an end to the nonsense by beginning to yell at the top of its voice, at which the priestess rushes forward and snatches it from you with, "There, there, there! What did ums do to ums?" "How very extraordinary!" you say pleasantly. "Whatever made it go off like that?" "Oh, why you must have done something to her!" says the mother indignantly; "the child wouldn't scream like that for nothing." It is evident they think you have been running pins into it.

The brat is calmed at last, and would no doubt remain quiet enough, only some mischievous somebody points you out again with "Who's this, baby?" and the intelligent child, recognizing you, howls louder than ever.

Whereupon, some fat old lady remarks that "It's strange how children take a dislike to any one."

"Oh, they know," replies another mysteriously. "It's a wonderful thing," adds a third; and then everybody looks sideways at you, convinced you are a scoundrel of the blackest dye; and they glory in the beautiful idea that your true character, unguessed by your fellowmen, has been discovered by the untaught instinct of a little child.

Babies, though, with all their crimes and errors, are not without their use—not without use, surely, when they fill an empty heart; not without use, when, at their call, sunbeams of love break through care-clouded faces; not without use when their little fingers press wrinkles into smiles.

Odd little people! They are the unconscious comedians of the world's great stage. They supply the humor in life's all too heavy drama. Each one, a small but determined opposition to the order of things in general, is for ever doing the wrong thing, at the wrong time, in the wrong place, and in the wrong way. The nurse-girl, who sent Jenny to see what Tommy and Totty were doing, and "tell 'em they mustn't," knew infantile nature. Give an average baby a fair chance, and if doesn't do something it oughtn't to, a doctor should be called in at once.

They have a genius of doing the most ridiculous things, and they do them in a grave, stolid manner that is irresistible. The business-like air with which two of them will join hands and proceed due east at a break-neck toddle, while an excitable big sister is roaring for them to follow her in a westerly direction, is most amusing—except, perhaps, for the big sister. They walk round a soldier, staring at his legs with the greatest curiosity, and poke him to see if he is real. They stoutly maintain, against all argument, and much to the discomfort of the victim, that the bashful young man at the end of the "bus" is "daddy." A crowded street corner suggests itself to their minds as a favorable spot for the discussion of family affairs at a shrill treble. When in the middle of crossing the road, they are seized with a sudden impulse to dance, and the doorstep of a busy shop is the place they always select for sitting down and taking off their shoes.

When at home, they find the biggest walking-stick in the house, or an umbrella—open preferred—of much assistance in getting upstairs. They discover that they love Mary Ann at the precise moment when that faithful domestic is blackleading the stove, and nothing will relieve their feelings but to embrace her then and there. With regard to food, their favorite dishes are coke and cat's meat. They nurse pussy upside down, and they show their affection for the dog by pulling his tail.

They are a deal of trouble, and they make a place untidy, and they cost a lot of money to keep; but still you would not have the house without them. It would not be home without their noisy tongues and their mischief-making hands. Would not the rooms seem silent without their pattering feet, and might not you stray apart if no prattling voices called you together?

It should be so, and yet I have sometimes thought the tiny hand seemed as a wedge, dividing. It is a bearish task to quarrel with that purest of all human affections—that perfecting touch to a woman's life—a mother's love. It is a holy love, that we coarser fibered men can hardly understand, and I would not be deemed to lack reverence for it when I say that surely it need not swallow up all other affection. The baby need not take your whole heart, like the rich man who walled up the desert well. Is there not another thirsty traveller standing by?

Do not, in your desire to be a good mother, forget to be a good wife. No need for all the thought and care to be only for one. Do not, whenever poor Edwin wants you to come out, answer indignantly, "What, and leave baby?" Do not spend all your evenings upstairs, and do not confine your conversation exclusively to whooping-cough and measles. My dear little woman, the child is not going to die every time it sneezes, the house is not bound to get burnt down, and the nurse run away with a soldier, every time you go outside the front door; nor the cat sure to come and sit on the precious child's chest the moment you leave the bedside. You worry yourself a good deal too much about that solitary chick, and you worry everybody else too. Try and think of your other duties, and your pretty face will not always be puckered into wrinkles, and there will be cheerfulness in the parlor as well as in the nursery. Think of your big baby a little. Dance him about a bit; call him pretty names; laugh at him now and then. It is only the first baby that takes up the whole of a woman's time. Five or six do not require nearly so much attention as one. But before then the mischief has been done. A house where there seems to be no room for him, and a wife too busy to think of him, have lost their hold on that so unreasonable husband of yours, and he has learnt to look elsewhere for comfort and companionship.

But there, there! I shall get myself the character of a baby hater, if I talk any more in this strain. And Heaven knows I am not one. Who could be, to look into the little innocent faces clustered in timid helplessness round those great gates that open down into the world?

The world! the small round world! what a vast, mysterious place it must seem to baby eyes! What a trackless continent the back garden appears! What marvellous explorations they make in the cellar under the stairs! With what awe they gaze down the long street, wondering, like us bigger babies, when we gaze up at the stars, where it all ends!

And down that longest street of all—that long, dim street of life that stretches out before them—what grave, old-fashioned looks they seem to cast! What pitiful, frightened looks sometimes!

Poor little feet, just commencing the stony journey! We, old travellers, far down the road, can only pause to wave a hand to you. You come out of the dark mist, and we, looking back, see you, so tiny in the distance, standing on the brow of the hill, your arms stretched out toward us. God speed you! We would stay and take your little hands in ours, but the murmur of the great sea is in our ears, and we may not linger. We must hasten down, for the shadowy ships are waiting to spread their sable sails.

Minnie May's Dep't.

Toiling Hands.

The hands of brothers and sisters dear
Lend comfort on our pilgrimage way.
Their cheerful aid, and caressing touch,
Oft drive our sorrow and care away.
And father's hands unselfishly toil,
To fight the hungry wolf from the door,
They bless indeed, with their ministries—
Then, pray, could we ever ask for more?

Ah, more is given! see mother's hands,
So taperless, horny, rough, and thin!
They tell with eloquence, more than words,
Of the heart's unchanging love within.
O blessed hands! can we fully know
How much for dear ones they've moiled and won,
Till folded for aye, across her breast,
Their toiling ended, their lifework done?

FANNIE L. FANCHER

MY DEAR NIECES—

Sympathy is needed far more than it is given as we go through this life. Take for instance, a mother's case. When your children run to you for sympathy with all their small worries, give it freely and ungrudgingly, lay down your book or work and show the child that you feel with it, or for it, as the case may be. When your little girl comes running to you, her earnest face full of the importance of the moment, just give what she needs, no matter what the importance of your own occupation may be. How can you withhold it? Do not say oh! run away and play, mother is busy. What a disappointed look comes over the former happy face. That rebuke will be long remembered, and the little one will feel she has been cheated of her rights. Your school boy has got into trouble, perhaps with one of his classmates, and tells mother all about it, counting upon her sympathy. Do not send him away disappointed, encourage him to tell you all, and make him feel you can enter into all his feelings. Believe me, my dear nieces, the memory of that sympathy given when asked and needed has helped your boy over a rough place, and will come back to him as one of those memories that never fade.

When an aged parent or friend pours out his grievance, perhaps only an outcome of pettishness peculiar to advanced age, just tell him you are sorry for him, and the relief to his poor fretted heart will be immense. Far better than to say "you are imagining everything; you have nothing to complain about."

A kind neighbor may have met with losses or disappointments. Go to him and tell him of your sympathy. Do not let diffidence hold you back, for the nature of his loss may be such as to make him seem to avoid you; your ready sympathy will help him feel that the world is not all against him. You know my dear nieces there are certain sorrows—heart sorrows—for which the best sympathy is silence or a pressure of the hand. Words can do nothing to lessen such a grief, and are idle and useless. Then where you can give your sympathy, it will relieve the heart of many an overburdened mortal, and you will have a kindly satisfaction in feeling that you have done what you could to bear another's burden.

If we had the power to choose and could regulate at pleasure our condition in life how many