

WHAT IS CRAM?

BY ELLEN E. KENVON.

THE most zealous teachers need to ask themselves this question. There is cram in the Kindergarten, cram in the college, cram in the church, cram in the home, cram in the best as well as in the poorest primary school.

The most pernicious cram of all is that practised on the child at the earliest age—nursery cram. Its exceeding viciousness is due to three facts: (1) It affects human growth at the point of least resistance, thus taking deepest hold of all. A wise old Pope said, "Give me the child until he is five years of age and I care not who takes him afterward." (2) It is practised mainly for the selfish purposes of those who have charge of the children and seek this easiest means of managing them. Forces unethical in nature cannot fail to be unethical in effect when exerted upon the sensitive organism of a child, though the result may not be seen for many years. (3) It deals mainly with lies told the child for temporary purposes, in utter recklessness of the fact that sooner or later he must learn their falsity with something of a shock to his moral growth.

The absorbent nature of the child between cradle and school is ready for all good or all evil. It cannot take directly any great natural laws or moral truth, but it can assimilate thousands of the facts in which those laws and truths are rolled up. To bring it into contact with these facts and leave the rest to the laws of assimilation is the part of the teacher; but the nursemaid leads it away from "the ugly worm" and tells it "a policeman is coming." The fear of the outer world occasioned in early childhood by tales of policemen and

kidnappers exists long afterward as an obstruction of the growth of humanitarian sentiment. The teacher who subsequently tries to awaken a sense of the brotherhood of man has this hidden rock in her way and must do much skilful questioning to find it out. And the bugaboo in the dark corner that frightens the child into silence at bedtime, though it may be unlearned as a fact (and to the child's moral cost), has its evil effect in the nerve tissue, not to be easily, if ever, recovered from.

The management of the Santa Claus myth, beautiful as it is, and taught as much for the children's pleasure as for that of the adults who keep it up, is often such as to cause moral disturbance when it is unlearned as a fact. "Mamma said there was a Santa Claus and now I know there isn't any. I don't believe there's any God, either." This is the just punishment of devout parents who make untrue statements to their children. The bad management of this myth is due to a lack of understanding of the nature of myth in general and of human history.

In primitive days, when mysteries arose, man had to solve them for himself. He had no misleading trusted guardian at hand to give him false explanations. He had no fallen angel to condemn when explanations proved false. If he encouraged bright fictions of his own imagination, only to resign them later with pain, he had none to blame for telling him what was not true.

The Santa Claus myth is of a piece with the special providence idea, which is probably nearly as old as the human imagination itself. The very young child finds what he wants within his reach and accepts it as a wind-