

TORTURES OF CHILDHOOD

Some of the Sorrows of the Small Person

By LLOYD ROBERTS

"Oh happy days of childhood
That are forever past!"

HOW the poet does rave! I wonder if he has forgotten the Saturday night's bath! Perhaps he never had one; then he has one bright memory the less. More likely he sings in spite of it, to show art triumphant over adversity, or to supply the popular demand. Anyway, let him sing, but return with me to those early days of stern reality, so fraught with tragedy, that was none the less terrible because it appears so light to us grown-ups now in these contented days of maturity.

We always came in turn. Three had passed through the ordeal, and lived. I was fourth and last. How I envied them snuggling under the warm covers as I marched solemnly out of the nursery clad in nightie and bedroom slippers, and so down the cold stairs to the kitchen and the scrubbing. Then our house didn't contain that extravagant luxury—an enamel bath—but the big wooden tub that rejuvenated the family wash did double duty and received our little pink bodies also.

The kitchen was hot and full of steam. The stove was red-hot in patches, and close beside it across two chairs waited the overworked tub.

It hadn't long to wait. The gown was snatched over my head, and as I kicked free of the slippers I would be picked bodily up and placed in the water.

Ouch! but it burnt. For a few seconds one would have to shut his teeth to keep from being a cry-baby, until the body got used to the feel of it. I don't suppose it was really very hot, but cubs have tender skins and sensitive nerves.

How the soap did skate up and down one's back, along legs and arms, with marvellous rapidity, until finally a sud would lodge in each eye, and enforce a momentary pause. When the smart eased the conflict would recommence, but now you had learned a lesson and obstinately kept your eyes shut tight.

Then came the rubbing—the greatest hardship of all. Standing shivering beside the tub in a temperature that had suddenly dropped around zero, the rough towel commenced its work with a vigour that left the skin red and smarting in its wake. The ears *must* be dry, and that meant keen agony, as if a corkscrew was boring around in one's head. You always wondered if your scalp was fastened on tight enough to withstand the touseling. Finally the towel reached the soles of your feet and there was more torture. When the stiff, cold nightgown was at last dropped over your head you felt as if you had passed none too successfully through a Turkish bath, a football game and an inquisition. But, joy of joys, for a whole blessed week it was a thing of the past, and you held your little red face up to be kissed and toddled on up to bed.

Saturday was the one glorious day of the week, in spite of the dismal ending. One toiled to this Mecca in the awe-inspiring presence of Miss Moore with a dirty slate crammed with fish-hooks and dashes. But though Sunday meant freedom from such tyranny it also meant a series of miseries that before the day was done made one long to again surrender himself to the governess.

For instance, one couldn't help waking up Sunday mornings at the same time as other days; but the grown-up folks had a queer habit of sleeping late. That meant you had to be still as a mouse or you'd wake them up. If you did that almost anything was liable to happen. So you lay in bed with the sunlight streaming in through the crack in the curtains and harkened to the birds calling you out to the dewy meadows and the butterflies and the flowers. My! how the minutes did crawl! You heard at long intervals the big study clock downstairs boom out the hour, while the bed grew more and more hot and stuffy and the enforced patience more and more unbearable. When you heard the two in the other bed giggle right out loud you'd go sh-s-s-s! and everybody would try as hard as he could to go to sleep again. But that did no good. The harder you tried the wider awake you'd become.

After a long, long time the Lord of Destiny would come stalking in to kiss us good-morning and the siege was broken. Then we hooted and threw a surreptitious pillow or two and gave general vent to our pent-up energies, before we began the tiresome process of getting into our Sunday clothes.

I remember we never seemed to have quite enough time in which to get comfortably washed and dressed and our porridge eaten before church "went in." There was always a mad scramble, made worse by breaking shoe-strings, lost hats and mislaid

prayerbooks, and long after every one else had arrived and in a desperate stillness we would file in, march way up to the front where all could see us and sit stiff and erect in those hard, cold pews.

When you stood up your legs grew tired; when you kneeled your knees ached horribly, and the sermon period was worst of all. You soon grew impatient of studying the saints and apostles in the coloured windows, in counting the number of sheep one long-haired shepherd had and in wondering how angels could take off their nighties when they wore wings. But the venerable gentleman in the pulpit droned along (year after year it seemed) with his meaningless jumble of words and waving of arms. Even the sermon had an end, and then it was sort of fun dropping our cents into the cake-dish that was passed around. The air always tasted sweet and nice after the stuffy church, but instead of rushing about and playing games you had to walk sedately back the way you came, two and two, with the huge starched bows tickling your chin and your shiny shoes squeaking loudly.

All day it was just like that—couldn't do anything. It wouldn't be seemly to romp on the Sabbath; besides, it would muss your best clothes. Right after the cold mid-day meal the older ones would have to shut themselves in separate rooms and learn the collect for the day; so you were driven to take refuge in the nursery and play with a much-abused rag-stuffed pug that the makers had evidently intended for a cat.

Usually a few dignified dames would call in the afternoon, and no matter how careful you had been in hiding yourself away, when the voice of authority echoed through the house you would come meekly forth and go shyly in to be presented. Sometimes they would kiss you and you must grin and bear it, with your rage bottled up in your little velvet coat. You hated almost everybody on Sunday.

"Sick? Who's sick? I ain't one little bit." But you had to stick out your tongue and that gave you away. Then you were in for it. I never could learn to swallow a pill. It invariably stuck in the back of my mouth, no matter how much water I gulped down, and for hours the taste of it made life miserable. If the doctor came he would always run a spoon down my throat and almost strangle me, then leave the best assortment of awful-tasting medicines yet devised. Added to all this there would be a mustard plaster that did no good unless it parboiled your chest. My playmate, Dick, used to pretend sick so he wouldn't have to go to school, but the tortures he had to submit to always cured him with marvellous rapidity, and he wouldn't try the game again until the remembrance grew dim in his mind. I always preferred school to castor oil.

One day when we were playing Indians in the woods back of the house, Dick discovered some red berries that he said were mighty fine eating. We both ate a lot. Then he thought again and said that perhaps after all they were poisonous. We ran home as fast as we could and told on ourselves. But when the Lord of Destiny reached up to the medicine closet and got the bottle of castor oil, we decided they weren't dangerous after all and knew they were only pigeon-berries. However, it was too late. Just in case we had made a mistake we were forced to take it—a huge tablespoonful, too. Gee whizz! I can taste the stuff now. Not as it really is, for it isn't so *awfully* horrible, but as it felt to us, as between our long-drawn sobs we forced it slowly down.

There was one occasion when, though we were very sick indeed, we never did let on, but suffered in seclusion and silence. That was after we had committed one of the seven deadly sins and received our first experience with tobacco. When men came to visit the lord they would sit in the study, smoke innumerable cigarettes and throw the butts through the open window out on the terrace. There in our path was a temptation impossible to resist. We had often been told that cigarettes would put a sudden end to our growth and do other terrible things to us, and we believed them in all faith, just as we dared not make faces at one another for fear the passing wind would freeze our features forever in their grotesque contortions. Some grown-up had told us so. One morning when we were feeling particularly dare-devilish and reckless we discussed the idea behind the woodshed until we were worked up to the required pitch, then sneaked around the house with heads bent low and quickly snatched up three or four of the longest unburnt cigarette butts. I remember our fear lest someone should look out of

the window above and catch us red-handed; but luck was with us that day and we won the seclusion of the woods without discovery.

Dick had a few matches (*we* were never allowed to touch them) and with breathless excitement we commenced our puffing, just as we had seen the Big People do. For a short time we reveled in our sin—and then—!

Well, it was a long, long time before we dared the thing again, and then with clay pipes and hayseed or tea, believing them to be much less potent than the half-smoked tobacco. We were never caught at it; or the wrath of the gods would have descended most vigorously on the seats of our "pants."

Dick was a much bigger boy than I was, and used to improve spare moments, especially when there were onlookers around, by devising ingenious methods of bullying. I always resented the treatment and fought back fiercely, but with scant success. Sometimes he would get me down on the ground and sit on me. He would call me ugly names and endeavour to make me the butt of every practical joke. And yet he liked me better than any of the other boys around and strange to say I reciprocated the feeling. But just the same he made life miserable more often than any other one object of all my cub days.

Every little while one of our playmates would have a birthday, and of course a party. These events we would look forward to with keen expectation, counting the days that intervened. And yet how much disappointment and heartburning came in their wake! Some one else always seemed to get the ring and five-cent piece in the cake though you tried your best, accepting a piece every time it was passed around, and after you simply couldn't stuff another crumb down your throat, breaking it up into minute particles in search of the hidden prizes. After you rose from your chair, gloomy at leaving so many nice things uneaten on the table, hide-and-seek would be started. A table seemed to offer one of the best refuges, and you'd crawl under softly on hands and knees. In a little while the one who was "it" would go by on somebody's trail, and here was your chance for a clear run for home. Now, it is a curious fact that you never once seemed to get quite clear from under the table before you jumped to your feet. There would be a violent collision, that your head bore the full brunt of, followed by a thousand bright stars, and a bump the size of a hen's egg, to say nothing of getting caught and having to be "it" next time.

Gee! the way one got scratched and cut and banded and bruised, no matter how careful you were! You couldn't rig up a see-saw, or slide down a tree like a monkey, or play ship with packing-boxes without getting caught on a splinter or a nail and having a pirate-like wound in your skin and a rent in your clothes that it was impossible to hide from the grown-ups. One of our favourite amusements was sliding down stairs on the largest tea-tray. Sometimes it would stick fast while going at full speed, but you would keep right on going and inevitably land on your head. Sliding down the banisters it was the same way. I can tell you the arnica bottle was kept busy! Sometimes you would feel a little bloodthirsty and behead your sister's pet doll—the one that would go to sleep when you laid it down—or you'd tie an empty can to the kitten's tail and watch the excitement, or hide your brother's clothes in the morning, or pour a dipper of water into his bed at night. Swift retribution usually followed, the severity according to the offence. It wasn't always the slipper or the hair-brush. Often you had to climb up on a chair, your face to the wall, and not speak to anyone for an awful long time. Even when you heard Dick whistling to you to come out and play, you couldn't move. It wasn't much fun being bad after all.

At night every dark room would be full of ghosts. If you were sent into the dining-room for a chair, you would try and persuade one of the other children to accompany you, or else reach in your hand as far as possible and get the one nearest the door. As for the attic you wouldn't dare go up there for anything, even with a lamp. Your worst nightmares for many years, even after you had grown quite big and brave, would be connected with that little-used part of the house and the awful things you'd meet there.

If you were unfortunate enough to wake up in the dead of night when everybody was sound asleep, you would imagine you saw strange shapes peeking over the foot of the bed and heard terrible things coming up the stairs, until there was nothing left to

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