

The Inglenook

His Majesty, Baby.

By John Watson, D.D., (Ian Maclaren.)

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 town on the street.

In a 'bus where there is nothing to do for 40 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 real, 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 had 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, bloodless face, Baby leaned forward and tapped gently on the deed, and then, when the keen face looked up in quick 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 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."

Two passengers on Baby's left had endured these escapades with patient and suffering dignity. When a boy is profoundly conscious that he is—well, a man, and yet a blind and unfeeling world conspires to treat him as—well, a child—he must protect himself, and assert his position. Which he does, to the delight of everybody with any sense of humor, by refusing indignantly to be kissed by his mother or sisters in public, by severely checking any natural tendency to enthusiasm about anything except sport, by allowing it to be understood that he has exhausted the last remaining pleasure and is fairly burnt out. Dear boy, and all the time ready to run a mile to see a cavalry regiment drill, and tormented by a secret hankering after the Zoological Gardens. These two had been nice little chaps two years

ago, and would be manly fellows two years hence. Meanwhile they were provoking, and required chastisement or regeneration. Baby was to them a "kid," to be treated with contempt; and when in the paroxysm of delight over that folly of a law paper he had tilted one of the young men's hats, that base ancient replaced it in position with a bored and weary air. How Baby had taken in the situation I cannot guess, but he had his mind on the lads, and suddenly, while they were sustaining an elaborate unconcern, he flung himself back and crowded—yes, joyfully crowded—with rosy, jocund countenance in the whites of the eyes of the two solemnities. One raised his eyebrows, and the other looked at the roof in despair; but I had hopes, for who could resist this bubbling, chortling mirth? One laughs a glad, boyish chuckle, and the other tickles baby just at the right spot below the chin—has a baby at home after all, and loves it—declaring aloud that he is a "jolly little beggar." Those boys are all right; there is a sound heart below the light affectations, and they are going to be men.

This outburst of His Majesty cheered us all mightily, and a young woman at the top of the 'bus, catching his eye, waved her hand to him, with a happy smile. Brown glove, size six and a quarter, perhaps six, much worn, and jacket also not of yesterday; but everything is well made, and in perfect taste. Milk-white teeth, hazel eyes, Grecian profile—what a winsome girl!—and let me see, she takes off a glove—yes, is wearing an engagement ring; a lucky fellow, for she must be good with those eyes and that merry smile. A teacher, one guesses, and to-day off duty, going to meet her fiance in the city, and then the three—her mother, that dear woman with hair turning grey—will go upon the river, and come home in the sweet summer evening full of content. As soon as he gets a rise in the office they will marry, and she will also have her gift, as every woman should. But where am I now?—let that Baby bear the blame.

We had one vacant place, and that was how he intruded on our peace; but let me make one excuse for him. It is aggravating to stand on the edge of the pavement and wave your umbrella ostentatiously to a 'bus which passes you and draws up fifteen yards ahead, to make your dangerous way along a slippery street with hansom bent upon your life, to be ordered to "hurry up" by the impatient conductor and ignominiously hauled on to a moving 'bus. For an elderly gentleman of military appearance and short temper it was not soothing, and he might have been excused a word or two, but he distinctly exceeded.

He insisted in language of great directness and simplicity that the conduc-