

MORE ABOUT INFANT PRODIGIES IS WILLIAM SIDIS DECLINING?

The Boy Wonder at Harvard in Ill Health—Is Your Child's Brain Too Ripe—Why Prodigies Blossom Forth Too Often to an Early Decline.

William James Sidis, of Harvard, isn't quite so well. He fell sick late in January, with what seemed to be symptoms of overwork, and the robust health which students of his age, if not his attainments, ought to possess has seemed to be impaired.

Who is William James Sidis? You needn't ask anybody in Cambridge, or even in Boston, that question. In fact, you needn't ask anyone who is directly or indirectly concerned with education who William James Sidis is. They all know him, or know of him, for he is the latest—many say, the greatest—child prodigy the human species has produced.

And there are two classes of people who, when they learn of William's illness, manifest not the least surprise. One class is composed of physicians, especially those who have to do with children. The other class is that numerous section of the female sex who are mothers.

Both, whenever they heard of the astounding learning already acquired by young Master Sidis, of Brooklyn, aged 11 years, wondered what under the sun could be the inducement that led his parents—especially his father, Boris Sidis, who is professor of psychology in the university—to give him the spur instead of the check if they wanted to safeguard his sanity or his life.

Yet the multifarious biographies of youthful prodigies leave plenty to be said on the parents' side, for not all of them have died young or gone crazy. Some of them have simply abated the extraordinary activity of their brains and matured as quite commonplace mortals, while others have emerged from the risks of debilitated bodies and nerves strong enough, mentally and physically, to live acclaimed as geniuses.

The maternal anxiety, which can feel so charily, albeit vigorously, for the Sidis child is felt by every mother whenever her fond and proud eyes or ears perceive some fresh stage in the mental growth of her offspring. There are few women, indeed, who are entirely free from the intuitive apprehension that if they have mothered a prodigy, they have produced a creature too brilliant to survive. And when the mother who doesn't prefer her child's destiny to be one of normal if inglorious life to that of world-wide fame and untimely destruction?

The physicians, gifted perhaps with none of the intuition which is the mother's distinctive attribute, nevertheless are inclined to regard with a just suspicion every exceptional development of abnormal faculties, for too many examples have occurred to parallel the immurement in an insane asylum, recently, of young Sidis' most famous predecessor in the prodigy role and the son of another Harvard professor at that.

In their eyes, these preternaturally brilliant young intelligences are prone to be like exhausting flames, burning out of the body the very essence of life's powers—a too early ripening that means a too early decay.

In the present generation the race of prodigies has proved most numerous, as though there were something in the climate of America which, of a sudden, is stimulating the older stock to an amazing brilliancy in its progeny.

There are no fewer than four such prodigies at Harvard alone. Besides the childish Sidis, there is a boy of 14, Norbert Weiner, who is already bachelor of arts. He is the youngest student known to have achieved that degree in academic learning.

Then there are a brother and sister, Adolph and Lina Berle, he 14 and she 15 years old, who are members, respectively, of the freshman classes at Harvard and Radcliffe. Where young Weiner graduated from Tufts College, the Berle children were taught almost entirely by their father, languages first and later mathematics.

Sidis, whose speciality has always been mathematics, is at once the youngest of the modern, astonishing quartette and the first to break down.

Could write at three. To this time the Sidis boy has presented no trace whatever of deterioration in health. Utterly abnormal in the instinctive seizure of principles underlying the modern method of study and in his unparalleled quickness of perception, he was abnormal only by comparison with the average of humanity at his age. His overwhelming abnormality has always seemed normal to him and to those who are conversant with him, for the acquisition of knowledge were as much his natural and healthy pleasure in life as the acquisition of a watermelon by moonlight would be normal and natural to the average boy living near a farm.

He could write at the age of three years, knew elementary mathematics at seven, spoke five languages at eight, and entered Tufts College at ten. Every checked, the picture of the ordinary, well-to-do boy, he appeared before the Harvard Mathematical Club three weeks before his breakdown and delivered to gray-haired professors a lecture of his own composition on the fourth dimension.

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a subject so abstruse that only the most profoundly learned among those very learned mathematicians were able to comprehend him at all.

He explained, in the course of his lecture, several theories of his own which, when demonstrated, proved to be so many revelations in the laws of mathematics previously undreamed of by the greatest mathematicians who have ever lived.

While the centuries past have produced not a few all-round prodigies of the calibre of the Admirable Critic, treacherously assassinated by Italy's most evil duke during a causeless jealousy, the only approach in mathematical genius to the living Sidis was Karl Friedrich Gauss, born in Brunswick, Germany, of humble parents in 1777.

No such precise record of his juvenile attainments have been preserved as are available regarding those of the Sidis boy, but his talents so appealed to the reigning duke of Brunswick that he was given the liberal education of his time. He lived to become one of the world's most famous mathematicians. In 1855, years before the telegraph became the practical medium it is for the transmission of language, he demonstrated its practicability.

It would be too long a story to review the countless contributions, and of the highest importance, which Gauss made to magnetism, mathematics and astronomy. He lived to be 78 years old, and died with such a record of scientific advancement that the century of his birth was formally celebrated in 1877.

The most frequent, as well as the most conspicuous, instances of youthful genius make their appearance on the stage of history in music, although all the young musical prodigies who ever lived couldn't quite equal in number the one, sudden crop of child actors of a generation ago, who popped up the minute Elsie Leslie made her epochal hit as Little Lord Fauntleroy.

The Gerry Society, in New York, managed to quash whole colonies of them, where it could be proved that the greed of parents was working the child at an age when health required moderate study and plenty of play. Elsie Leslie has developed into an actress of sterling worth, and some of the other child actors of that period hold more or less excellent positions on the American stage; but no Bernhardt or Siddons has yet made good.

As a Gauss made good in science, Elsie, however, both vocal and instrumental, the prodigies are more frequently likely to read their titles to fame. The unsurpassed Adeline Paton still lives, although age has sternly barred her from her triumphs. She was so little when she first sang with that divine voice of hers that stories are still told of how she had to be stood on a table to let her auditors see her.

Her voice might, indeed, have been the purely physical endowment so often apparent in the work of famous brought to the technical knowledge of singing, at her earliest age, qualities of discernment and facility of learning little short of genius.

That was the character of the amazing Mozart, who labored in the highest field of the musician, the creative. Strangely reminiscent of the human achievement, it is known that

NEW LIGHT ON SHAKESPEARE; AN AMERICAN'S DISCOVERY

From the New York Sun.

A young American, Charles William Wallace, has brought to light from the millions of documents filed in the public record office in London a series of official papers, mainly depositions in a suit at law, by means of which the world now possesses for the first time a vivid picture of Shakespeare as he moved and worked among men.

Mr. Wallace, who is a student of English literature in the University of Nebraska, learned that the public record office of London is stored from top to bottom with countless documents on Shakespeare, and he set to work to find out what the records of various sizes, which constitute the chief records of all England from Anglo-Saxon times down to the present.

He reasoned that there if any where there might be some valuable material affecting the great poet, the daunted by the seemingly endless proportions of the task ahead of him, he went to work, aided by his wife, Tony, who checked, the picture of the ordinary, well-to-do boy, he appeared before the Harvard Mathematical Club three weeks before his breakdown and delivered to gray-haired professors a lecture of his own composition on the fourth dimension.

Side by side with him worked Mary, "the modest maiden of the household," only child of Mountjoy; and at the end of his six years apprenticeship Stephen had proved himself so good a workman and so lovable a youth that Madam Mountjoy at any rate seemed well pleased with the idea that the two young people should be falling in love. Toward the close of 1604, however, Stephen returned for foreign travel, and made a short sojourn in Spain, but soon returned to the house and shop. Not long after that Madam Mountjoy, informing Shakespeare that Mary and young Bellott evidently cared much for each other, asked his good offices in making two hearts happy. She told the poet that if he could bring the young man to a formal proposal of marriage, a dowry fitting to their station should be settled upon them at their wedding. One may imagine the willingness with which the creator of "Romeo and Juliet" listened to Madam Mountjoy's request that he assist in the unfolding of a love story in real life.

It is unnecessary here to relate the details of the delicate situation, suffice

the baby Mozart at first appeared included the study of figures. But the whole atmosphere of his home hung about him the sublime fascinations of music, and the bent of his genius was formed while he was so young that few, if any, ever suspected the existence of an inclination to the colder sciences.

Portraits are extant showing him, at the age of 6 years, attired in the court suit which the Empress Maria Theresa gave to her little sorcerer of Melody.

In this generation, with Josef Hofmann too old to pass longer as the "boy pianist," and with no record of surpassing original composition to differentiate the newer musical prodigies, the most remarkable example of musical precocity is probably Marie Hall, who, at 16, was the favorite pupil of the distinguished Hungarian violinist, Sevcik.

France's other pluming itself on the early maturity of the literary skill of Maurice Rostand, son of the poet, Edmond Rostand. But Maurice is already 18, and his productions are rather of promise than performance. No abstractness of science has yet sufficed to trace certainly the origins of such precocious talent as many children manifest, or of the apparently omniscient genius possessed by William James Sidis, although at nine years his parents go slowly lest their offspring grow ripe with learning at too tender an age.

Anatomical skill, concerning itself after death with the useless body to its hands, has studied the brain of a Gauss, for example, and has found astonishing departures from the normal in the structure of the brain.

In that marvelous mathematician's brain structure, richness of fissuration was particularly notable in the frontal region, while the sub-parietal regions exhibited a relatively enormous expansion.

Professor Spitzka's Theory. Professor Edward Anthony Spitzka, of Jefferson Medical College, in Philadelphia, whose pre-eminent study of brains has fixed upon him the attention of the world of medical science, has confessed himself after all his observations, unable to tell precisely what makes these children so precocious in their accomplishment.

"Why some brains develop slowly and others rapidly," he says, "is another question to be relegated to the consideration of the 'inequality of man.'"

"In the precocious genius it must for the present be assumed, that the ripening of the nerve fibers is perhaps stimulated by some obscure bio-chemical conditions which are less marked or less effectual in the ordinary child."

It is fair to assume such chemical factor, for the absence or impairment of function of the thyroid gland, which is invariably associated with mental failure and retardation of the infantile state so characteristic of sporadic cretinism, cannot be regarded in this connection.

"We need not assume that the secretions of the thyroid gland alone are essential; many other bodily functions, yet undiscovered, may be necessary. Who knows whether there may not be some substance which stimulates brain development just as the adrenal secretion stimulates the development of the cells of the arterial system to contract?"

"Indeed, the early ripening of the brain sometimes seems to be an over-ripening, due to the presence of some substance either in itself toxic or produced in abnormal quantity or strength."

Far more than the distinguished expert's surmise as to the causes of infant prodigies, is a aptly made comment of the heart of every mother and the cautious judgment of every physician by the brief words of warning with which he concludes his comment.

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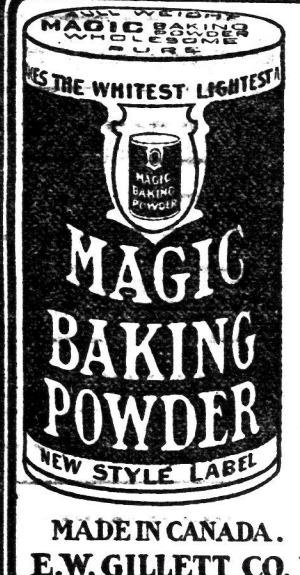
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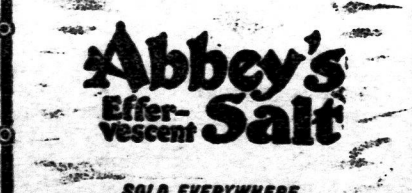
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