

Unto Babes

By R. H. Benson

A few days after the conversation I have described my visit to the old man came to an end, and my work drew me back to London; but I left behind me a promise to return and spend Christmas at his house. He in the meantime would, he promised me, try to put together some other stories for me against the time that I should return. There were many others, he said, that he had come across in his life which he hoped would interest me, besides a few more personal experiences of his own.

And so I left him smiling and waving to me from his bedroom window that overlooked the drive (for I had to go by an early train), with the clean-shaven face of his old servant looking at me discreetly and gravely from the clear-glass chapel window next to the priest's room, where he had been setting things ready before his master was dressed.

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It was a dark winter afternoon when I returned, a week or so before Christmas.

The coachman told me on my inquiry that his master seemed very much aged during the autumn and winter, that he had scarcely left the house since the leaves had fallen, except to sit for an hour or two in sunshiny weather in the sheltered angle of the wall where was the tiled platform that I have spoken of; and that he was afraid he had been suffering from depression. There had been days of almost complete silence, at least so Parker had told him, when the master had sat all day turning over letters and books and old drawers.

I reproached myself with having troubled the old man with demands for more stories; and feared that it had been in the attempt to please me that he had fallen brooding over the past, perhaps dwelling too much on sorrows of which I knew nothing.

As we passed under the pines that tossed their sombre plumes in the wind, the sun, breaking through clouds in an angry glory on my right, blazed on the little square-paned windows of the house on my left. The chapel-window on the top story seemed especially full of red light streaming from within, but the flame swept across the upper story as we drove past, and left the windows blank and colourless just before we turned the corner at the back of the house.

The old man met me in the hall, and I was startled to see the change that had come to him. His eyes seemed larger than ever, and there was a sorrow in them that I had not seen before. They had been the eyes of a stainless child, wide and smiling; now they were the eyes of one who was under some burden almost too heavy to be borne. In the stronger light of the sitting-room as the candles shone on his face, I saw that my impression had only been caused by a drooping of the eyelids, that now hung down a little further. But it looked a tired face.

He welcomed me, and said several charming things to me that I should be ashamed to quote, but he made me feel that he was glad that I had come; and so I was glad too. But he said among other things this:

“I am glad you have come now, because I think I shall have something further to tell you. I have had indications during this autumn that the end is coming, and I think that if I have to pass through a dark valley,—and I feel that I am at its entrance even now,—I think that He will give me His staff as well as His rod. But I am an old man and full of fancies, so please do not question

me. But I am very glad,” and he took my hand and stroked it for a moment, “very glad that you are here, because I do not think that you will be afraid.”

During the following days he told me many stories, bringing out the old books and letters of which the coachman had spoken, and spelling out notes through his tortoiseshell glass, as he sat by the open fireplace in the central sitting-room, with the logs crackling and overrun with swift sparks as they rested on their bed of ashes. The door into the garden where the old drive had once been was now kept closed, and a heavy curtain hung over it.

We did not go out very much together—only in the early afternoons we would walk for an hour or so, he leaning on my arm and on a stick, up and down the terraced walk that lay next the drive under the pines, as the sunset burned across the hills like a far-away judgment. Some day perhaps I will write out some of the stories that he told me, although not all. I have the notes by me.

Here is one of them.

We were walking on one of these dark winter afternoons very slowly uphill towards the village that the priest might get a change from the garden. The morning had been gusty and wet, with sleet showers and even a sprinkle of pure snow as the sky cleared after lunch time; and now the weather was settling down for a frost, and the snow lay thinly here and there on the rapidly hardening ground.

“It is remarkable,” the old man was saying to me, “how in spite of our Lord’s words people still think that faith is a matter more or less of intellect. Such a phrase as ‘intelligent faith’ is, of course, strictly most incorrect.”

He stopped and looked at me as he said this, as if prepared for dispute. I did not disappoint him.

“You are very puzzling,” I said. “I cannot believe that you do not value intellect. Surely it is a gift of God, and therefore may adorn faith, as any other gift may do.”

“Yes,” he said, walking on, “it may adorn it; but it has nothing more to do with it really than jewels have to do with a beautiful woman. In fact, sometimes faith is far more beautiful unadorned, and it is quite possible to crush a delicate and growing faith with a weight of learned arguments intended to adorn and perfect it. Christian apologetics, it seems to me, are only really useful in the mouth of one who realises their entire inadequacy. You can demonstrate nothing of God. You can, by arguments, draw a number of lines that converge towards God, and render His existence and His attributes probable; but you cannot reach him along those lines. Faith depends not on intellectual but on moral conditions. ‘Blessed are the pure in heart,’ said our Saviour, not ‘Blessed are the profound or acute of intellect’—‘for they shall see God.’ It is certainly true of intellectual as of all other riches that they who Possess them shall find difficulty in entering into the kingdom of God.”

“And so,” I said, “you think that intellectual powers are not things to covet, and that education is not a very important question after all?”

“No more than wealth,” he answered, “at least so far as you mean by education instruction in demonstrable facts or exact sciences. The point of our existence here is to know God. Well, you know for yourself how the race for wealth is ruining millions of souls to-day. No less surely is keen intellectual competition ruining souls. Mr. —, for instance,” he said, naming a well-known critic and poet; “was there ever a man of keener and finer intellect, or of more unerring instinct in matters of literary taste? Well, once I talked with that man most of a day on all his own subjects; in fact, he did nearly all the talking, and I was astonished, I must confess, at the perfection of the training of his already brilliant powers. So much I could perceive, though of

course I could not follow him. And of course there were many delicate shades of beauty, if not much more, invisible to me in his talk and criticism. His scale of intellectual beauty ran up out of my sight altogether. But what astonished me more was the coarseness and dullness of his spiritual instinct. I will not call him a child in matters of faith, because that would be high praise; but he was just an ill-bred boor. I have known many a Sussex villager of far purer and finer spiritual fibre. No, no; faith can and does exist quite apart from intellect; and to increase or develop the one often means the decrease and incoherence of the other. *Seigneur, donnez-moi la foi du charbonnier!*”

I must confess that this was a new point of view for me; and I am not sure now whether I do not still think it exaggerated and dangerous; but I said nothing, because it did seem to open up difficult questions, and also to throw light on other difficult questions. The priest turned to me again as he walked.

“Why, it must be so,” he said; “if it were not, clever people would have a better hope of salvation than stupid people; and that is absurd—as absurd as if rich people should be nearer God than poor people. No, no; talents are distributed unevenly, it is true: to one ten and to another five; but each has one pound, all alike.”

We had reached the top of the slope, and the towering hedges had gradually fallen away, so that we could now see far and wide over the country. Away behind us, as we paused for breath, we could see the misty Brighton downs, while in the middle distance lay tumbled wooded hills, with smoke beginning to curl up here and there from the evening fires of hidden villages. The sky was clear overhead, but in the west, where the sunset was beginning to smoulder, a few heavy clouds still lingered.

“And God sees all:” said the priest.

“Can you put up with another story as we walk home again? I think I ought to be turning now.”

We turned and began to retrace our steps downhill.

“This is not an experience of my own, he said. “It was told me by a friend of mine in Cornwall. He was the squire of a little village a few miles out of Truro, and lived there most of the year except a few weeks in the spring, when he would go abroad. He was a man of great learning and taste, but had the faith of a little child. It was like a spring of clear water to hear him speak of God and heavenly things.

“There was a boy in the village who was an idiot. His parents were dead, and he lived alone with his old grandmother, who was a strict Calvinist, and who regarded her grandson as hopelessly damned because his faith and his expression of it were not as hers. There were evident signs, she said, that God’s inscrutable decrees were against him. The local preachers there would have nothing to do with the boy; and the clergyman of the parish, after an attempt or two, had given the child up as hopeless. I think my friend told me that the clergyman had tried to teach him Old Testament history.

“Well, the boy was a terrible and disgusting case. I will not go into details beyond saying that the boy’s head had the look of a mule about it; his mother, I think, had had a fright shortly before his birth, and the boy used to think sometimes that he was a horse or mule, and the village children used to encourage him in it, and ride and drive him on the green, for he was quite harmless. And so he grew up, neglected and untaught, spending much of his time out of doors, and creeping home on all fours in the evening, snorting and stamping and neighing when he was much excited; and he would stable himself in a corner of the wide dark kitchen, and munch grass; while his grandmother sat in her high chair by the fire reading in her Bible, or looking over her spectacles at the poor misshapen body in the corner that held a damned soul.

“Now my friend hated to see this child. It was the one thing that troubled his faith. Those who have the faith of children have also the troubles of children; and this living example before his eyes of what looked like the carelessness of God, or worse, was a greater offence to my friend’s faith than all infidel arguments, or the mere knowledge that such things happened.

“On a certain Christmas Eve my friend had been a long tramp over the hills with a guest who was staying with him for the shooting. They were returning through his own property towards evening, and were just dropping down from the hill. Their path lay along the upper edge of an old disused stone-quarry, whose entrance lay perhaps a hundred yards away from the valley-road that led into the village—so it was a lonely and unfrequented place. The evening was closing in; and my friend, as he led the way along the path, was trying to make out the outlines of stones and bushes on the floor of the quarry, which lay perhaps seventy feet below them. All at once his eye was caught by the steady glimmer of light somewhere in the dimness beneath, and the sound of a voice. He guessed at once that there were tramps below, and was angry at the thought that they must have wilfully disregarded the notice he had put up about making a fire so close to the wood: and he determined to turn them out, and, if need be, to give them shelter for the night in one of his own outhouses. So he stopped and explained to his friend which path would take him home, while that he himself intended to make his way along the lip of the quarry to the entrance, and then to go on into its interior where the tramps had made their camp; and he promised to be at the house five minutes after his friend.

“So they separated, and he himself soon found his way down a narrow overgrown path that brought him to the opening of the quarry.

“It was a good deal darker here, as the hill shadowed it from the west, and high trees rose on one side; but he was able to stumble along the stony path which led to the interior, though it grew darker still as he went. Presently he turned the corner of a tall boulder, and emerged into the kind of semi-circus that formed the heart of the quarry: before him, about a third way up the slope, burned the glimmer of light he had noticed from above, but even as he saw it it went out: my friend stood in the path and called out, explaining who he was, not threatening at all, but offering if it was any one who wanted shelter, to provide it for the night. There was no answer, only the sound of scuffling in the dimness in front, and then the confused sound of footsteps scrambling: my friend ran forward, calling, and made out presently an oddly shaped thing scrambling over the silt and stone towards a shoulder of rock that stood out against the sky on his left (I think he said). He tried to follow, but it was too dark, and after he had stumbled once or twice, he gave up the pursuit. In a moment more the climbing figure stood out clear against the sky for an instant, and then disappeared: and the squire saw with a shock of disgust the mule-like head and tangled hair rising from the high shoulders of the village idiot, and his hands dangling on each side of him; and he heard a high-screaming neighing. But at least, he thought to himself, he would go and see what the boy had been doing.

“He made his way up the slope of silted gravel and mud that lay against the face of the rock, and at last reached a little platform apparently stamped and cut out at the top of the skree just where it touched the quarry-side. It was too dark for him to distinguish anything clearly, so he struck a match and held it in the still sheltered air while he looked about him. This is what he saw.

“There was a short halter, with a kind of rude head-stall, fastened to a rusty iron staple driven into the rock. There was a little pile of cut grass below it. There was a kind of mud trough constructed against the stone, with a little straw sprinkled in it and holly berries and leaves in front of it; but this showed signs of having been hastily trampled down, though parts of it

survived: there were marks of hob-nailed boots in it here and there. So much my friend had noticed when the match burned his fingers: but just before he dropped it he noticed something else which made him open his box and light another match: and then he saw the end of a farthing taper sticking out of the ground into which it had been pushed, and another crushed into a ball. He drew out the first and lighted it, and then noticed this last thing. Quite plainly marked on the soft edge of the mud-trough, in a place which the bob-nailed boots had not touched, was the mark of a tiny child's naked foot, as if a baby had stood in the trough or manger, with one foot on the floor and another on the edge.

"Now I do not know what you think of this, but I know what my friend thought of it, and what I myself think of it. But before he went home he went first to the cottage where the boy lived and found him as usual tethered in the corner, with his grandmother nodding before the fire. The boy would do nothing but snort and stamp: and the grandmother could only say that ten minutes ago the boy had run in and gone straight to his corner as usual. The squire asked whether the boy had been trusted with a child by any one; but the grandmother said it was impossible. Nor indeed did he ever after hear a word of a child having been missed on that afternoon.

"Then, before he went home, he went to the little church, already decorated for the festival, and there with the fragrance of the holly and yew in the air about him, and the glimmer of a candle near the altar where the church-cleaner was sweeping, he praised the Holy Child whose Birth-night it was, and who had not disdained to lie in a manger and be adored by the beasts of the stall.

"The following morning on his way back from church he went to the quarry again with his friend to show him what he had seen; but the manger and the holly-berries and crumpled taper were all gone, and there was nothing to see but the iron staple and the platform beaten hard and flat."

We had reached the avenue of pines by now that led to the house, and turned in by the little garden-gate.

"The story seems to show," the priest added, "that intellect has not much to do with the knowledge of God; and that the things which He hides from the wise and prudent He reveals to babes."