

Charles Dickens

THE COUPLE WHO DOTE UPON THEIR CHILDREN

The couple who dote upon their children have usually a great many of them: six or eight at least. The children are either the healthiest in all the world, or the most unfortunate in existence. In either case, they are equally the theme of their doting parents, and equally a source of mental anguish and irritation to their doting parents' friends.

The couple who dote upon their children recognise no dates but those connected with their births, accidents, illnesses, or remarkable deeds. They keep a mental almanack with a vast number of Innocents'-days, all in red letters. They recollect the last coronation, because on that day little Tom fell down the kitchen stairs; the anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot, because it was on the fifth of November that Ned asked whether wooden legs were made in heaven and cocked hats grew in gardens. Mrs. Whiffler will never cease to recollect the last day of the old year as long as she lives, for it was on that day that the baby had the four red spots on its nose which they took for measles: nor Christmas-day, for twenty-one days after Christmas-day the twins were born; nor Good Friday, for it was on a Good Friday that she was frightened by the donkey-cart when she was in the family way with Georgiana. The movable feasts have no motion for Mr. and Mrs. Whiffler, but remain pinned down tight and fast to the shoulders of some small child, from whom they can never be separated any more. Time was made, according to their creed, not for slaves but for girls and boys; the restless sands in his glass are but little children at play.

As we have already intimated, the children of this couple can know no medium. They are either prodigies of good health or prodigies of bad health; whatever they are, they must be prodigies. Mr. Whiffler must have to describe at his office such excruciating agonies constantly undergone by his eldest boy, as nobody else's eldest boy ever underwent; or he must be able to declare that there never was a child endowed with such amazing health, such an indomitable constitution, and such a cast-iron frame, as his child. His children must be, in some respect or other, above and beyond the children of all other people. To such an extent is this feeling pushed, that we were once slightly acquainted with a lady and gentleman who carried their heads so high and became so proud after their youngest child fell out of a two-pair-of-stairs window without hurting himself much, that the greater part of their friends were obliged to forego their acquaintance. But perhaps this may be an extreme case, and one not justly entitled to be considered as a precedent of general application.

If a friend happen to dine in a friendly way with one of these couples who dote upon their children, it is nearly impossible for him to divert the conversation from their favourite topic. Everything reminds Mr. Whiffler of Ned, or Mrs. Whiffler of Mary Anne, or of the time before Ned was born, or the time before Mary Anne was thought of. The slightest remark, however harmless in itself, will awaken slumbering recollections of the twins. It is impossible to steer clear of them. They will come uppermost, let the poor man do what he may. Ned has been known to be lost sight of for half an hour, Dick has been forgotten, the name of Mary Anne has not been mentioned, but the twins will out. Nothing can keep down the twins.

'It's a very extraordinary thing, Saunders,' says Mr. Whiffler to the visitor, 'but--you have seen our little babies, the--the-- twins?' The friend's heart sinks within him as he answers, 'Oh, yes--often.' 'Your talking of the Pyramids,' says Mr. Whiffler, quite as a matter of course, 'reminds me of the twins. It's a very extraordinary thing about those babies--what colour should you say their eyes were?' 'Upon my word,' the friend stammers, 'I hardly know how to answer'--the fact being, that except as the friend does not remember to have heard of any departure from the ordinary course of nature in the instance of these twins, they might have no eyes at all for aught he has observed to the contrary. 'You wouldn't say they were red, I suppose?' says Mr. Whiffler. The friend hesitates, and rather thinks they are; but inferring from the expression of Mr. Whiffler's face that red is not the colour, smiles with some confidence, and says, 'No, no! very different from that.' 'What should you say to blue?' says Mr. Whiffler. The friend glances at him, and observing a different expression in his face, ventures to say, 'I should say they WERE blue--a decided blue.' 'To be sure!' cries Mr. Whiffler, triumphantly, 'I knew you would! But what should you say if I was to tell you that the boy's eyes are blue and the girl's hazel, eh?' 'Impossible!' exclaims the friend, not at all knowing why it should be impossible. 'A fact, notwithstanding,' cries Mr. Whiffler; 'and let me tell you, Saunders, THAT'S not a common thing in twins, or a circumstance that'll happen every day.'

In this dialogue Mrs. Whiffler, as being deeply responsible for the twins, their charms and singularities, has taken no share; but she now relates, in broken English, a witticism of little Dick's bearing upon the subject just discussed, which delights Mr. Whiffler beyond measure, and causes him to declare that he would have sworn that was Dick's if he had heard it anywhere. Then he requests that Mrs. Whiffler will tell Saunders what Tom said about mad bulls; and Mrs. Whiffler relating the anecdote, a discussion ensues upon the different character of Tom's wit and Dick's wit, from which it appears that Dick's humour is of a lively turn, while Tom's style is the dry and caustic. This discussion being enlivened by various illustrations, lasts a long time, and is only stopped by Mrs. Whiffler instructing the footman to ring the nursery bell, as the children were promised that they should come down and taste the pudding.

The friend turns pale when this order is given, and paler still when it is followed up by a great pattering on the staircase, (not unlike the sound of rain upon a skylight,) a violent bursting open of the dining-room door, and the tumultuous appearance of six small children, closely succeeded by a strong nursery-maid with a twin in each arm.

As the whole eight are screaming, shouting, or kicking-- some influenced by a ravenous appetite, some by a horror of the stranger, and some by a conflict of the two feelings--a pretty long space elapses before all their heads can be ranged round the table and anything like order restored; in bringing about which happy state of things both the nurse and footman are severely scratched. At length Mrs. Whiffler is heard to say, 'Mr. Saunders, shall I give you some pudding?' A breathless silence ensues, and sixteen small eyes are fixed upon the guest in expectation of his reply. A wild shout of joy proclaims that he has said 'No, thank you.' Spoons are waved in the air, legs appear above the table-cloth in uncontrollable ecstasy, and eighty short fingers dabble in damson syrup.

While the pudding is being disposed of, Mr. and Mrs. Whiffler look on with beaming countenances, and Mr. Whiffler nudging his friend Saunders, begs him to take notice of Tom's eyes, or Dick's chin, or Ned's nose, or Mary Anne's hair, or Emily's figure, or little Bob's calves, or Fanny's mouth, or Carry's head, as the case may be. Whatever the attention of

Mr. Saunders is called to, Mr. Saunders admires of course; though he is rather confused about the sex of the youngest branches and looks at the wrong children, turning to a girl when Mr. Whiffler directs his attention to a boy, and falling into raptures with a boy when he ought to be enchanted with a girl. Then the dessert comes, and there is a vast deal of scrambling after fruit, and sudden spirting forth of juice out of tight oranges into infant eyes, and much screeching and wailing in consequence. At length it becomes time for Mrs. Whiffler to retire, and all the children are by force of arms compelled to kiss and love Mr. Saunders before going up-stairs, except Tom, who, lying on his back in the hall, proclaims that Mr. Saunders 'is a naughty beast;' and Dick, who having drunk his father's wine when he was looking another way, is found to be intoxicated and is carried out, very limp and helpless.

Mr. Whiffler and his friend are left alone together, but Mr. Whiffler's thoughts are still with his family, if his family are not with him. 'Saunders,' says he, after a short silence, 'if you please, we'll drink Mrs. Whiffler and the children.' Mr. Saunders feels this to be a reproach against himself for not proposing the same sentiment, and drinks it in some confusion. 'Ah!' Mr. Whiffler sighs, 'these children, Saunders, make one quite an old man.' Mr. Saunders thinks that if they were his, they would make him a very old man; but he says nothing. 'And yet,' pursues Mr. Whiffler, 'what can equal domestic happiness? what can equal the engaging ways of children! Saunders, why don't you get married?' Now, this is an embarrassing question, because Mr. Saunders has been thinking that if he had at any time entertained matrimonial designs, the revelation of that day would surely have routed them for ever. 'I am glad, however,' says Mr. Whiffler, 'that you ARE a bachelor,--glad on one account, Saunders; a selfish one, I admit. Will you do Mrs. Whiffler and myself a favour?' Mr. Saunders is surprised--evidently surprised; but he replies, 'with the greatest pleasure.' 'Then, will you, Saunders,' says Mr. Whiffler (?)

Whiffler, in an impressive manner, 'will you cement and consolidate our friendship by coming into the family (so to speak) as a godfather?' 'I shall be proud and delighted,' replies Mr. Saunders: 'which of the children is it? really, I thought they were all christened; or--' 'Saunders,' Mr. Whiffler interposes, 'they ARE all christened; you are right. The fact is, that Mrs. Whiffler is--in short, we expect another.' 'Not a ninth!' cries the friend, all aghast at the idea. 'Yes, Saunders,' rejoins Mr. Whiffler, solemnly, 'a ninth. Did we drink Mrs. Whiffler's health? Let us drink it again, Saunders, and wish her well over it!'

Doctor Johnson used to tell a story of a man who had but one idea, which was a wrong one. The couple who dote upon their children are in the same predicament: at home or abroad, at all times, and in all places, their thoughts are bound up in this one subject, and have no sphere beyond. They relate the clever things their offspring say or do, and weary every company with their prolixity and absurdity. Mr. Whiffler takes a friend by the button at a street corner on a windy day to tell him a bon mot of his youngest boy's; and Mrs. Whiffler, calling to see a sick acquaintance, entertains her with a cheerful account of all her own past sufferings and present expectations. In such cases the sins of the fathers indeed descend upon the children; for people soon come to regard them as predestined little bores. The couple who dote upon their children cannot be said to be actuated by a general love for these engaging little people (which would be a great excuse); for they are apt to underrate and entertain a jealousy of any children but their own. If they examined their own hearts, they would, perhaps, find at the bottom of all this, more self-love and egotism than they think of. Self-love and egotism are bad qualities, of which the unrestrained exhibition, though it may be sometimes amusing, never fails to be wearisome and unpleasant. Couples who dote upon their children, therefore, are best avoided.