

MY CRAPULOUS CONTEMPORARIES

NO. VI

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PHILOSOPHERS have always erred by generalizing from too few facts. Into this trap fell even the author of the injunction, "De mortuis nil nisi bonum," though one may concede that it was excusable, even creditable, in him to have been unable to foresee my Uncle.

Born, as will presently become clear, in the earliest years of the reign of Queen Victoria, his genius quickly developed. He had that simplicity of vision, that flashing insight, which stamps the highest types of intelligence. When only six years old, while meditating on the increasing difficulty of earning an honest living, and the increasing risk of earning a dishonest one, he saw a fond mother give her little boy a penny to buy sweets. In a single second his mind was made up; his career was determined. How, thrilled the Master-Thought—how can I get that penny?

A rapid calculation assured him of the soundness of his instinct. Probably at least a hundred thousand mothers—of the world's six hundred million—give a penny to some child every day.

A hundred thousand pence a day is over a hundred and fifty thousand pounds a year; if he could only get ten per cent. of that, he wouldn't be doing so badly.

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That night, as he said his prayers at his mother's knee, she was surprised and pleased to hear a new petition: "And oh! dear Jesus, do let me do ever such a great work for other little children! Bring them all in! Don't let me miss one out."

Hot stuff for six, I don't think.

It was evident, to his astuteness and business capacity, that this work demanded the most complete organization. He therefore obtained a post under Government, so that, while touching a good salary, his whole time was free to devote to his great scheme. "Punctuality," he often said to me, "is the thief of time; procrastination is the soul of business," and would justify his paradox by pointing out that if you only left letters unanswered long enough, the need to answer them disappeared.

His system, in fact, became extremely popular; even Charles Dickens playfully animadverts upon it in one of his novels.

A secretary being necessary to him, he pressed his sister A—— into the service, thereby saving her from such terrible temptations as love, marriage, or even occasional relaxation, which is known to be the devil's subtlest engine, and saving himself from the expense of hiring a drudge.

He applied the same fine intelligence to all the problems of life. Onanism, he argued, is demonstrably safe and economical; further, it is secret, and can be passed off as chastity; hence credit with the pious. Again, "I am out to get the money that parents give their children; I am the Sole Inventor of the 'Kinchin-lay'; and I am certainly not going to queer my own pitch by getting children. I might have to give them pennies now and then myself." Onanism consequently became the rule of his life; and it is only fair to say that I believe the

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persistent rumours (especially in latter years) of his assaults on young children to be entirely without foundation. At least it is certain that nothing was ever brought home to him. While he was still a young man he definitely founded an organization on the lines of the well-known and justly admired Children's Scripture Union. He issued a card, price one penny, with the days of the year, and a "portion of Scripture" indicated for reading on this day. As the card could be prepared in half an hour by any one, and printed at about fourpence halfpenny a hundred, there was a small but sufficient margin of profit—or would have been but for the expense of getting the scheme under way.

My uncle's genius never hesitated. "Of all the puppies on earth, the 'pi' set at Cambridge are the most priggish," he exclaimed enthusiastically.

So he got hold of a few, and called them Evangelists. They were to go down (of course, at their own expense) to the seaside—where the children with the pennies were, not to the slums, where there were plenty of children but no pennies—and hold "services," the object of all which was to sell these cards, and force the unhappy infant who was really interested in Judges to switch off to Leviticus. Christian parents were, however, quick to see that my uncle's genius had forged a new tyranny, and his scheme had the heartiest of receptions. The Children's Special Service Mission had met with unqualified success; his own might easily match it, so he surmised—as the event proved, justly. Children were obliged to throw down spade and bucket, and gather round the unwashed feet and swelled head of the "university man"—usually non-collegiate!—who found himself free to splutter

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as he would, without the wholesome fear of ragging which restrained him during term.

My uncle was now in a position to develop his scheme fully, and the ring of philanthropic blackmailers and blackguards who run religious charities were compelled to admit him to a share of the spoils. He founded a Magazine, with some external and internal resemblance to that excellent paper, *Our Own Magazine*, which, with consummate impudence, he declared to contain nothing but true stories. These stories are usually about the good little girl who "converts" the horrid, swearing bargee, and the good little boy who brings his "thoughtless" mother to Jesus. This, being a monthly, brought in another twelve pennies annually from every victim. He also published leaflets which he could sell by the hundred to the kind of idiot that likes to give such things to strangers who have never done it any harm. He had all these things translated into dozens of languages, and the rill of pennies swelled to a mighty river.

By this time his sister A—— was worn out, and died. For a month he had to pay a typist; but she little knew my uncle if she thought she had a permanent job. He rushed off to some ghastly Welsh "resort," to be acclaimed as the Founder of the Faith by the flourishing branch of the "Mission" which he had established there, and, selecting a female with the features and character of an anæmic cow, married her and her money, sacked the typist, and settled down as the principal ornament of London's most suburban "subbub."

I suppose none even of his accomplices will regret his death; to the lachrymal glands of a crocodile he added the bowels of compassion of a cast-iron rhinoceros; with the

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meanness and cruelty of a eunuch he combined the calculating avarice of a Scotch Jew, without the whisky of the one or the sympathetic imagination of the other. Perfidious and hypocritical as the Jesuit of Protestant fable, he was unctuous as Uriah Heep, and for the rest possessed the vices of Joseph Surface and Tartufe; yet, being without the human weaknesses which makes them possible, he was a more virtuous, and therefore a more odious, villain.

In feature resembling a shaven ape, in figure a dislocated Dachshund, his personal appearance was at the first glance unattractive. But the clothes made by a City tailor lent such general harmony to the whole as to reconcile the observer to the phenomenon observed.

Of unrivalled cunning, his address was plausible; he concealed his genius under a mask of matchless mediocrity, and his intellectual force under the cloak of piety. In religion he was an Evangelical, that type of Nonconformist who remains in the Church in the hope of capturing its organization and its revenues.

An associate of such creatures of an inscrutable Providence as Coote and Torrey, he surpassed the one in sanctimoniousness, the other in bigotry, though he always thought blackmail too risky, and slander a tactical error.

Without heart or conscience, either in his family relations or his public functions, he goes to a grave covered by the flowers of those who think it politic to pretend to honour him; and it is his tragedy that of all the obituaries penned by servile or venal dupes or accomplices of his misdeeds, none will survive the century. This article remains his sole enduring monument.

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