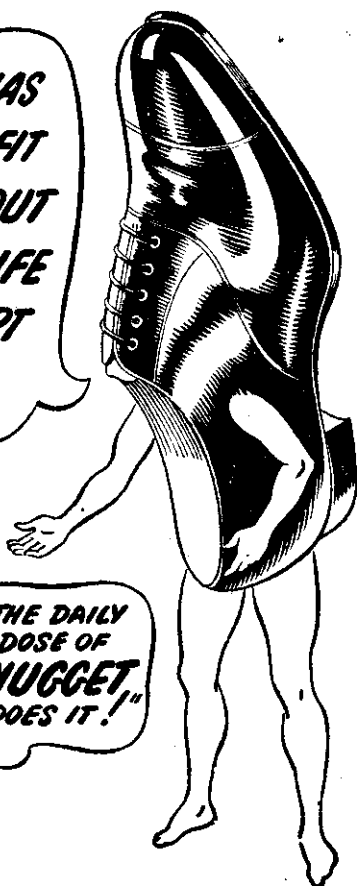


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THROUGHOUT
MY LONG LIFE
-AND SMART
TOO!"



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CRADLE SONGS

(Written for "The Listener"
by DOROTHY NEAL WHITE)

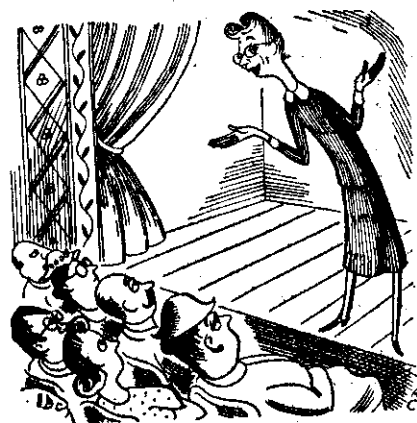
A LONG time ago, at Canterbury College, I listened once a week throughout the academic year to a series of lectures on the history and development of the English language. At seventeen philology appears a torpid subject. The young man who could awaken an enthusiasm for Jane Austen and make us see Shelley plain was hard put to keep the attention of a Stage 1 class fixed firmly on the long and complicated process whereby Anglo-Saxon slowly altered and became the English tongue as we spoke it. One device which he used to retain our interest seemed to me then an ingenious one. He used to illustrate Grimm's law about the mutations of the consonants in the several Aryan languages by a comparison with his own young baby's "fumbblings" with "ta-ta" and "da-da." I've forgotten how he worked it out. Or again he'd illustrate primitive syntax by a reference to the chatter of the three-year-old in his house, his precious first-born.

"The natural tendency of the Germanic languages," he told us, "is for the strong verbs to become weak. That of course is at those periods when the language is free of the grammarians' straight jacket. You can see this illustrated by a child's speech. My own boy, for instance (I mention him because I've had better facilities and more opportunity for studying him) tends always to use a weak verb. He will confide in me that he ate all his dinner, or announce that he told his little sister yesterday not to chew her toes."

The lecturer quoted other instances which now elude my memory, but his pedagogical device of referring to his own children impressed me deeply at the time. It showed initiative, and a wise recognition of the necessity of human interest. Not for a long time did I see the matter in its true perspective, that the young father, like Stevenson in another connection, was merely "indulging the pleasure of his own heart" and discussing his family not with the man in the next bus seat, or the next-door section, but with an audience of some 80 assembled persons.

Albert Worked Out Graphs

Later I came across other instances of similar activity. There was the psychologist who organised a children's party for his twins. Now normally the discussion of children's parties, however rowdy the revellers, or numerous the jellies, does not make suitable material for the conversation of the intelligentsia. My friend Albert was shrewd, though. With a notebook in a quiet corner he recorded the social contacts of his daughters. In the neat ingenuous handwriting of an ex-schoolmaster he noted the length of the lines behind each daughter in "Oranges and Lemons," and who was chosen first in the ancient struggles of "Nuts in May." After three hours of steady application, he had



"... able to talk about her children—
and be paid for it to boot"

proved to his own satisfaction that the popularity of the two children, like their physical form, was almost identical. Later he worked out graphs and tables, and worked up his findings into a scholarly article which was published ultimately in the "Australasian Journal of Philosophy and Psychology." And Albert dined out on that party. His description of his moppet's social life couched in a flinty psychologist's jargon was heard often at various houses, deflecting the conversation from such usually absorbing topics as the Easter caucus, University gossip and the genesis of *Ulysses*.

Albert, in my opinion, was recently eclipsed by a woman artist I know who gave a series of lectures on children's art. The lectures were given to a Workers' Education Association class—a misnomer perhaps, for the room was packed with school teachers and the wives of dentists and accountants who are not usually classed as the proletariat. The speaker, over some four evenings, discussed the development of a child's ability to paint and draw, from the early random scribbles, to the naturalistic paintings of early adolescence. She had an extensive collection of pictures, hundreds of them in large books, which were flashed on to a screen in chronological order. As a story it had all the fascination of one of those nature films which by some technical device show the life-cycle of a plant from the moment the first shoot appears until the petals fall from the blown flower. Such a telescoping of a sequence in time, whether of plant or child life, is fascinating. It was not until the lecture course was over that I learned that the pictures had all been drawn by the artist's own children. I envied her the gifted family, but more (for by this time I had a child of my own), I envied her the opportunity to discuss that gifted family. Like the philology lecturer years before, she had been able for hours at a time to talk about her children to a large audience—and be paid for it to boot.

Woodman, Spare That Child

A less sophisticated variation of the cradle song was given me by a forestry student in about 1935. He was at that time, the unusual creature, a married student. Now that celibacy among the university population has decreased he would be no oddity, but ten years ago wives, much less children, were rarely attached to students, and Vernon was something of a celebrity for his unusual acquisitions. He combined a passion for

(continued on next page)