

The Toys of Peace

Saki

“Harvey,” said Eleanor Bope, handing her brother a cutting from a London morning paper of the 19th of March, “just read this about children’s toys, please; it exactly carries out some of our ideas about influence and upbringing.”

“In the view of the National Peace Council,” ran the extract, “there are grave objections to presenting our boys with regiments of fighting men, batteries of guns, and squadrons of ‘Dreadnoughts.’ Boys, the Council admits, naturally love fighting and all the panoply of war . . . but that is no reason for encouraging, and perhaps giving permanent form to, their primitive instincts. At the Children’s Welfare Exhibition, which opens at Olympia in three weeks’ time, the Peace Council will make an alternative suggestion to parents in the shape of an exhibition of ‘peace toys.’ In front of a specially-painted representation of the Peace Palace at The Hague will be grouped, not miniature soldiers but miniature civilians, not guns but ploughs and the tools of industry . . . It is hoped that manufacturers may take a hint from the exhibit, which will bear fruit in the toy shops.”

“The idea is certainly an interesting and very well-meaning one,” said Harvey; “whether it would succeed well in practice—”

“We must try,” interrupted his sister; “you are coming down to us at Easter, and you always bring the boys some toys, so that will be an excellent opportunity for you to inaugurate the new experiment. Go about in the shops and buy any little toys and models that have special bearing on civilian life in its more peaceful aspects. Of course you must explain the toys to the children and interest them in the new idea. I regret to say that the ‘Siege of Adrianople’ toy, that their Aunt Susan sent them, didn’t need any explanation; they knew all the uniforms and flags, and even the names of the respective commanders, and when I heard them one day using what seemed to be the most objectionable language they said it was Bulgarian words of command; of course it *may* have been, but at any rate I took the toy away from them. Now I shall expect your Easter gifts to give quite a new impulse and direction to the children’s minds; Eric is not eleven yet, and Bertie is only nine-and-a-half, so they are really at a most impressionable age.”

“There is primitive instinct to be taken into consideration, you know,” said Harvey doubtfully, “and hereditary tendencies as well. One of their great-uncles fought in the most intolerant fashion at Inkerman—he was specially mentioned in dispatches, I believe—and their great-grandfather smashed all his Whig neighbours’ hot houses when the great Reform Bill was passed. Still, as you say, they are at an impressionable age. I will do my best.”

On Easter Saturday Harvey Bope unpacked a large, promising-looking red cardboard box under

the expectant eyes of his nephews. "Your uncle has brought you the newest thing in toys," Eleanor had said impressively, and youthful anticipation had been anxiously divided between Albanian soldiery and a Somali camel-corps. Eric was hotly in favour of the latter contingency. "There would be Arabs on horseback," he whispered; "the Albanians have got jolly uniforms, and they fight all day long, and all night, too, when there's a moon, but the country's rocky, so they've got no cavalry."

A quantity of crinkly paper shavings was the first thing that met the view when the lid was removed; the most exiting toys always began like that. Harvey pushed back the top layer and drew forth a square, rather featureless building.

"It's a fort!" exclaimed Bertie.

"It isn't, it's the palace of the Mpret of Albania," said Eric, immensely proud of his knowledge of the exotic title; "it's got no windows, you see, so that passers-by can't fire in at the Royal Family."

"It's a municipal dust-bin," said Harvey hurriedly; "you see all the refuse and litter of a town is collected there, instead of lying about and injuring the health of the citizens."

In an awful silence he disinterred a little lead figure of a man in black clothes.

"That," he said, "is a distinguished civilian, John Stuart Mill. He was an authority on political economy."

"Why?" asked Bertie.

"Well, he wanted to be; he thought it was a useful thing to be."

Bertie gave an expressive grunt, which conveyed his opinion that there was no accounting for tastes.

Another square building came out, this time with windows and chimneys.

"A model of the Manchester branch of the Young Women's Christian Association," said Harvey.

"Are there any lions?" asked Eric hopefully. He had been reading Roman history and thought that where you found Christians you might reasonably expect to find a few lions.

"There are no lions," said Harvey. "Here is another civilian, Robert Raikes, the founder of Sunday schools, and here is a model of a municipal wash-house. These little round things

are loaves baked in a sanitary bakehouse. That lead figure is a sanitary inspector, this one is a district councillor, and this one is an official of the Local Government Board.”

“What does he do?” asked Eric wearily.

“He sees to things connected with his Department,” said Harvey. “This box with a slit in it is a ballot-box. Votes are put into it at election times.”

“What is put into it at other times?” asked Bertie.

“Nothing. And here are some tools of industry, a wheelbarrow and a hoe, and I think these are meant for hop-poles. This is a model beehive, and that is a ventilator, for ventilating sewers. This seems to be another municipal dust-bin—no, it is a model of a school of art and public library. This little lead figure is Mrs. Hemans, a poetess, and this is Rowland Hill, who introduced the system of penny postage. This is Sir John Herschel, the eminent astrologer.”

“Are we to play with these civilian figures?” asked Eric.

“Of course,” said Harvey, “these are toys; they are meant to be played with.”

“But how?”

It was rather a poser. “You might make two of them contest a seat in Parliament,” said Harvey, “and have an election—”

“With rotten eggs, and free fights, and ever so many broken heads!” exclaimed Eric.

“And noses all bleeding and everybody drunk as can be,” echoed Bertie, who had carefully studied one of Hogarth’s pictures.

“Nothing of the kind,” said Harvey, “nothing in the least like that. Votes will be put in the ballot-box, and the Mayor will count them—and he will say which has received the most votes, and then the two candidates will thank him for presiding, and each will say that the contest has been conducted throughout in the pleasantest and most straightforward fashion, and they part with expressions of mutual esteem. There’s a jolly game for you boys to play. I never had such toys when I was young.”

“I don’t think we’ll play with them just now,” said Eric, with an entire absence of the enthusiasm that his uncle had shown; “I think perhaps we ought to do a little of our holiday task. It’s history this time; we’ve got to learn up something about the Bourbon period in France.”

“The Bourbon period,” said Harvey, with some disapproval in his voice.

“We’ve got to know something about Louis the Fourteenth,” continued Eric; “I’ve learnt the names of all the principal battles already.”

This would never do. “There were, of course, some battles fought during his reign,” said Harvey, “but I fancy the accounts of them were much exaggerated; news was very unreliable in those days, and there were practically no war correspondents, so generals and commanders could magnify every little skirmish they engaged in till they reached the proportions of decisive battles. Louis was really famous, now, as a landscape gardener; the way he laid out Versailles was so much admired that it was copied all over Europe.”

“Do you know anything about Madame Du Barry?” asked Eric; “didn’t she have her head chopped off?”

“She was another great lover of gardening,” said Harvey, evasively; “in fact, I believe the well known rose Du Barry was named after her, and now I think you had better play for a little and leave your lessons till later.”

Harvey retreated to the library and spent some thirty or forty minutes in wondering whether it would be possible to compile a history, for use in elementary schools, in which there should be no prominent mention of battles, massacres, murderous intrigues, and violent deaths. The York and Lancaster period and the Napoleonic era would, he admitted to himself, present considerable difficulties, and the Thirty Years’ War would entail something of a gap if you left it out altogether. Still, it would be something gained if, at a highly impressionable age, children could be got to fix their attention on the invention of calico printing instead of the Spanish Armada or the Battle of Waterloo.

It was time, he thought, to go back to the boys’ room, and see how they were getting on with their peace toys. As he stood outside the door he could hear Eric’s voice raised in command; Bertie chimed in now and again with a helpful suggestion.

“That is Louis the Fourteenth,” Eric was saying, “that one in knee-breeches, that Uncle said invented Sunday schools. It isn’t a bit like him, but it’ll have to do.”

“We’ll give him a purple coat from my paintbox by and by,” said Bertie.

“Yes, an’ red heels. That is Madame de Maintenon, that one he called Mrs. Hemans. She begs Louis not to go on this expedition, but he turns a deaf ear. He takes Marshal Saxe with him, and we must pretend that they have thousands of men with them. The watchword is *Qui vive?* and the answer is *L’état c’est moi*—that was one of his favourite remarks, you

know. They land at Manchester in the dead of the night, and a Jacobite conspirator gives them the keys of the fortress.”

Peeping in through the doorway Harvey observed that the municipal dust-bin had been pierced with holes to accommodate the muzzles of imaginary cannon, and now represented the principal fortified position in Manchester; John Stuart Mill had been dipped in red ink, and apparently stood for Marshal Saxe.

“Louis orders his troops to surround the Young Women’s Christian Association and seize the lot of them. ‘Once back at the Louvre and the girls are mine,’ he exclaims. We must use Mrs. Hemans again for one of the girls; she says ‘Never,’ and stabs Marshal Saxe to the heart.”

“He bleeds dreadfully,” exclaimed Bertie, splashing red ink liberally over the façade of the Association building.

“The soldiers rush in and avenge his death with the utmost savagery. A hundred girls are killed”—here Bertie emptied the remainder of the red ink over the devoted building—“and the surviving five hundred are dragged off to the French ships. ‘I have lost a Marshal,’ says Louis, ‘but I do not go back empty-handed.’”

Harvey stole away from the room, and sought out his sister.

“Eleanor,” he said, “the experiment—”

“Yes?”

“Has failed. We have begun too late.”

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