

Wit Inspirations of the “Two-Year-Olds”

Mark Twain

All infants appear to have an impertinent and disagreeable fashion nowadays of saying “smart” things on most occasions that offer, and especially on occasions when they ought not to be saying anything at all. Judging by the average published specimens of smart sayings, the rising generation of children are little better than idiots. And the parents must surely be but little better than the children, for in most cases they are the publishers of the sunbursts of infantile imbecility which dazzle us from the pages of our periodicals. I may seem to speak with some heat, not to say a suspicion of personal spite; and I do admit that it nettles me to hear about so many gifted infants in these days, and remember that I seldom said anything smart when I was a child. I tried it once or twice, but it was not popular. The family were not expecting brilliant remarks from me, and so they snubbed me sometimes and spanked me the rest. But it makes my flesh creep and my blood run cold to think what might have happened to me if I had dared to utter some of the smart things of this generation’s “four-year-olds” where my father could hear me. To have simply skinned me alive and considered his duty at an end would have seemed to him criminal leniency toward one so sinning. He was a stern, unsmiling man, and hated all forms of precocity. If I had said some of the things I have referred to, and said them in his hearing, he would have destroyed me. He would, indeed. He would, provided the opportunity remained with him. But it would not, for I would have had judgment enough to take some strychnine first and say my smart thing afterward. The fair record of my life has been tarnished by just one pun. My father overheard that, and he hunted me over four or five townships seeking to take my life. If I had been full-grown, of course he would have been right; but, child as I was, I could not know how wicked a thing I had done.

I made one of those remarks ordinarily called “smart things” before that, but it was not a pun. Still, it came near causing a serious rupture between my father and myself. My father and mother, my uncle Ephraim and his wife, and one or two others were present, and the conversation turned on a name for me. I was lying there trying some India-rubber rings of various patterns, and endeavoring to make a selection, for I was tired of trying to cut my teeth on people’s fingers, and wanted to get hold of something that would enable me to hurry the thing through and get something else. Did you ever notice what a nuisance it was cutting your teeth on your nurse’s finger, or how back-breaking and tiresome it was trying to cut them on your big toe? And did you never get out of patience and wish your teeth were in Jerico long before you got them half cut? To me it seems as if these things happened yesterday. And they did, to some children. But I digress. I was lying there trying the India-rubber rings. I remember looking at the clock and noticing that in an hour and twenty-five minutes I would be two weeks old, and thinking how little I had done to merit the blessings that were so unsparingly lavished upon me. My father said:

“Abraham is a good name. My grandfather was named Abraham.”

My mother said:

“Abraham is a good name. Very well. Let us have Abraham for one of his names.”

I said:

“Abraham suits the subscriber.”

My father frowned, my mother looked pleased; my aunt said:

“What a little darling it is!”

My father said:

“Isaac is a good name, and Jacob is a good name.”

My mother assented, and said:

“No names are better. Let us add Isaac and Jacob to his names.”

I said:

“All right. Isaac and Jacob are good enough for yours truly. Pass me that rattle, if you please. I can’t chew India-rubber rings all day.”

Not a soul made a memorandum of these sayings of mine, for publication. I saw that, and did it myself, else they would have been utterly lost. So far from meeting with a generous encouragement like other children when developing intellectually, I was now furiously scowled upon by my father; my mother looked grieved and anxious, and even my aunt had about her an expression of seeming to think that maybe I had gone too far. I took a vicious bite out of an India-rubber ring, and covertly broke the rattle over the kitten’s head, but said nothing. Presently my father said:

“Samuel is a very excellent name.”

I saw that trouble was coming. Nothing could prevent it. I laid down my rattle; over the side of the cradle I dropped my uncle’s silver watch, the clothes-brush, the toy dog, my tin soldier, the nutmeg-grater, and other matters which I was accustomed to examine, and meditate upon and make pleasant noises with, and bang and batter and break when I needed wholesome entertainment. Then I put on my little frock and my little bonnet, and

took my pygmy shoes in one hand and my licorice in the other, and climbed out on the floor. I said to myself, Now, if the worse comes to worst, I am ready. Then I said aloud, in a firm voice:

“Father, I cannot, cannot wear the name of Samuel.”

“My son!”

“Father, I mean it. I cannot.”

“Why?”

“Father, I have an invincible antipathy to that name.”

“My son, this is unreasonable. Many great and good men have been named Samuel.”

“Sir, I have yet to hear of the first instance.”

“What! There was Samuel the prophet. Was not he great and good?”

“Not so very.”

“My son! With His own voice the Lord called him.”

“Yes, sir, and had to call him a couple times before he could come!”

And then I sallied forth, and that stern old man sallied forth after me. He overtook me at noon the following day, and when the interview was over I had acquired the name of Samuel, and a thrashing, and other useful information; and by means of this compromise my father’s wrath was appeased and a misunderstanding bridged over which might have become a permanent rupture if I had chosen to be unreasonable. But just judging by this episode, what would my father have done to me if I had ever uttered in his hearing one of the flat, sickly things these “two-years-olds” say in print nowadays? In my opinion there would have been a case of infanticide in our family.

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