

*God, by God's ways occult,
May—doth, I will believe—bring back
All wanderers to a single track.*

BROWNING

THE following pages are taken from a series of letters which I received a year or two ago ; and since no one is now left to be affected by the publication of them it can be no abuse of the writer's confidence to employ them for the purpose I have in view. Only by such extracts can I convey any clear impression of the character of the person most concerned.

To many the chief interest in what follows will centre in the unconscious self-portraiture of the writer. Others may be most attracted by the frank and naïve picture of child-life. And yet a third class of readers may decide that the one passage of any real value is that which describes the

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incident with which the record closes. On these matters, however, any comment from me appears to be unnecessary.

I need only add that the writer of the letters was twice married, and that just before the death of his first wife their only child, a girl, died at the age of six weeks.

"I never could understand why men should be so insanely set on their first-born being a boy. This of ours, I am glad to say, is a girl. I should have been pleased either way, but as a matter of fact I wanted a girl. I don't know why, but somehow with a girl one feels that one has provided against the disillusionment, the discomfort, the homelessness of old age and of mental and physical decrepitude.

"For one thing above all others I

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am grateful: that, so far as I can see, heredity has played no horrible pranks upon us. The poor little mortal is wholesome and shapely from her downy little poll to her little pink toe-nails. She could not have been lovelier if Math had made her out of flowers (or was it Gwydion. You remember the *Mabino-gion*). And she grips hard enough already to remind one of her remote arboreal ancestors. One of God's own ape-lets in the Tree of life!"

"Exultant! No, dear C,—anything but that! Glad as I am, I am morbidly apprehensive and alert to a myriad possibilities of misery. I am all *quick*. I feel as though I had shed my epidermis and had but 'true skin' for every breath and touch of mischance to play upon.

"*I have been through it all before.*

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I was exultant then. I rode a bay trotting-horse, and was proud of heart and wore gloves in my cap. I feel sick at heart when I think how I was wrapped up in *that* child; how in my idolatry of her I clean forgot the savage irony of existence; how, when I was most unsuspecting, most unprepared—unarmed, naked—I was—stabbed from behind!

“I know what you will say. I see the grave look on your face as you read this. Perhaps I ought not to write it. I have never said so much to any one before; but that is what I felt—what I feel.

“Do you think, if I can help it, I shall give any one a chance of surprising me so again? This poor little mite can bring my heart with a leap into my throat, or send it down shivering into my boots—that I can't help—but never so long as I live,

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and dote on her as I may, never shall I again be taken at unawares. I have petrified myself against disaster. Sometimes as I am returning home in the gray dawn, sometimes even when I am putting the latch-key into the lock, I stop and hear an inward voice whispering, ‘Baby is dead;’ and I reply, ‘Then she is dead.’ The rest I suppress, ignore, refuse to feel or think. It is not pleasant schooling; but I think it is wise.”

To this I presume I must have replied with the usual obvious arguments, for he writes later:

“No; I *don't* think I lose more than I gain. Trust me, I take all I can get: only, I provide against reprisals. Yes; unfortunately all this does sound like Caliban on Setebos. Is that Caliban's fault? Dear man, I know I shock you. I almost shock

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myself; but how can *I* trust? Shall I bargain and say, 'You took the other: ensure me this one, and I will think you good and wise and merciful as a man?' And if I make no bargain, but simply profess belief that 'all was for the best,' will that destroy the memory of all that horror and anguish? Job! The author of 'Job' knew more about astronomy than he knew about fatherhood.

"The anguish and horror were perchance meant for my chastening! Am I a man to be chastened in that way? Or will you say, perhaps but for these you would have been a lost soul by this? To such questionings there is no end. As to selfishness, I will suffer anything for her sake; but how will she profit by my suffering *for the loss of her?*"

After an interval he wrote:

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"You are very good to take so much interest in the Heiress of the Ages. We have experienced some of the ordinary troubles—and let me gravely assure you that this is the single point in which she *does* resemble other children—but she is well at present and growing visibly. The Norse god who heard the growing of the grass and of the wool on the sheep's back would have been stunned with the *tintamare* of her development.

"Thereto she *noticeth*. So saith her mother; so averreth the nurse, an experienced and unimpeachable witness. Think of it, C! As the human mind is the one reality amid phenomena, this young person is really establishing and giving permanence to certain bits of creation. To that extent the universe is the more solid on her account.

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"Nor are her virtue and excellency confined to noticing; she positively radiates. Where she is, that is the sunny side of the house. I am no longer surprised at the folk-belief about the passing of a maiden making the fields fertile. I observe that in the sheltered places where she is taken for an airing the temperature is the more genial, the trees are in greener leaf, and the red half of the apple is that nearest the road. . . .

"Accept for future use this shrewd discovery from my experience. When a baby is restless and fretful, *hold its hands!* That steadies it. It is not used to the speed at which the earth revolves and the solar system whirls towards the starry aspect of Hercules (half a million miles a day!) Or it may be that coming out of the vortex of atoms it is sub-conscious of some sense of falling through the

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void. The gigantic paternal hands close round the warm, soft, twitching fists, soft as grass, and strong as the everlasting hills.

"I wonder if those worthy old Accadians had any notion of this when they prayed, 'Hold Thou my hands.'"

In several subsequent letters he refers to the growth and the charming ways of the "little quadruped," the "quadrumanous angel," the "bishop" (from an odd resemblance in the pose of the head to the late Bishop of Manchester). One passage must be given:

"It is an 'animal most gracious and benignant,' as Francesca calls Dante. Propped up with cushions, she will sit for half an hour on the rug at my feet while I am writing, content to have her fluffy head

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patted at the end of every second paragraph.

"This evening she and I had the study to ourselves. She on my knee, cosily snuggling within my arm, with a tiny hand clasped about each thumb. We were sitting by the window, and the western sky was filled with a lovely green light, which died out very slowly. It was the strangest and dreamiest of afterglows. She was curiously quiet and contented. As she sat like that, my mind went back to that old life of mine, that past which seemed so many centuries away; and I remembered how that poor little white creature of those unforgettable six weeks sat where *she* was now sitting—so unlike *her*, so white and frail and old-womanish, with her wasted arms crossed before her, and her thin, worn face fading, fading, fading away into

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the everlasting dark. Why does—how *can* things like these happen?

"She would have been nine now if she had lived. How she would have loved this tiny sister!

"You will be amused, perhaps you will be amazed, at my foolishness. When the postman hands you *Rhymes about a Little Woman** you will understand what I mean. In trotting up and down with the Immortal in my arms, crooning her to sleep, these rhymes *came*. I did not *make* them; they are a gift of the gods—so honour them! And sing—don't read—them. Seriously, the noticeable thing about them is their unlikeness to fictitious child-poems.

I did not print them on that account, of course. But to me it will always

* See p. 41.

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be a pleasant thing to see, when I am very, very old, that genuine bit of the past. And I like to fancy that some day she will read—with eyes not dry—these nonsense verses that her poor old father used to sing to her in

*“The days before
God shut the doorways of her head.”*

“You remember what I said about holding the child’s hands? When I went to bed very late last night, the words, ‘Hold Thou my hands,’ kept floating about in my mind, and then there grew on me the most perplexing half-recollection of a lovely air. I could not remember it quite, but it simply haunted me. Then, somehow, these words seemed to grow into it and out of it:

*Hold Thou my hands!
In grief and joy, in hope and fear,
Lord, let me feel that Thou art near,
Hold Thou my hands!*

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*If e'er by doubts
Of Thy good fatherhood depressed,
I cannot find in Thee my rest,
Hold Thou my hands!*

*Hold Thou my hands,—
These passionate hands too quick to
smite,
These hands so eager for delight,—
Hold Thou my hands!*

*And when at length,
With darkened eyes and fingers cold,
I seek some last loved hand to hold,
Hold Thou my hands!*

“I could endure it no longer, so I woke N [his wife]. I was as gentle, gradual, considerate as possible!—just as if she were waking naturally. And she *re-mon-strat-ed!* ‘The idea of waking any one at three in the morning to bother about a tune!’ Dear, dear!

“Well, it was from ‘The Yeoman of the Guard.’ You will know where by the rhythm and refrain!”

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As the months went by the "benign anthropoid" developed into a "stodgy volatile elephant with a precarious faculty of speech," and her father affected to be engrossed in ethnological and linguistic studies based on observations of her experiments in life and language. I now extract without further interpolation, merely premising that frequent intervals elapsed between the writing of the various passages, and that they themselves are but a small selection from many similar :

"The 'golden ephelant' is unquestionably of Early-English origin. Perpend: we in our degeneracy say 'milk;' she preserves the Anglo-Saxon 'meolc.' Hengist and Horsa would recognize her as a kinswoman. Through the long ages between them and her, the pleasant guttural pronunciation of the ancient pastures has

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been discarded by all but the traditional dairyman, and even he has modified the *o* into *u*. Similarly a 'wheel' is a 'hwéol.' But, indeed, she is more A-S than the Anglo-Saxons themselves. All her verbs end in 'en,' even 'I am-en.'"

"It is singularly interesting to me to watch the way in which she adapts words to her purposes. She uses 'knee' for 'to sit down.' To-day she made me 'knee' in the arm-chair beside her. 'Too big' expresses, comically enough sometimes, all kinds of impossibility. She asked me to play one of her favourite tunes. 'Pappa cannot, dearie.' 'Oh!'—with much surprise—'Too big?'"

"Oh, man, man, what wonderful creatures these bairnies are! Did it