

Children training themselves for murder



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“ARIADNA” writes:

English folk are fond of maintaining the superiority of their national morals as contrasted with those of our Continental neighbours across the seas. Yet had one of the latter been strolling down a thoroughfare of one of our large seaside resorts but a few days ago he might have been inclined to doubt it. In a large shop an alluring tray of boys’ knives was exhibited, ticketed “Jack Ripper’s knives”! In an adjacent street, a merry gang of children, aged respectively from six to eleven years, were playing at “Ripper,” jumping one over the other and knocking them down — a true *rehearsal* of the felonious act.

Of course the natural question would be, “Why did not their parents stop them and prohibit the ghastly play?” . . .

But they did not, it is evident; and the fond parents, children themselves of the present age, must have merrily laughed and felt amused at the “original idea.” Good Christian people! They do not even think of uprooting the evil by lodging a complaint against the infamous speculators who are permitted to bring out *such* a toy! The translators and publishers of Zola’s outlandish “immorality,” which shows vice in all its hideous nakedness and ugliness, are condemned to heavy fines. “Jack Ripper’s” knives are permitted to be freely sold to children: for what can be more innocent than a cardboard or a wooden knife, gaudily painted, for boys and girls to play with, on its very face! Has any of the lookers-on while witnessing those children, bright things “fresh from the hand of God,” the merry, playing babes, put himself the question:

What wilt thou be hereafter?

Yet, how many of these little boys and girls now openly sporting with knives and playing at “Jack Ripper” shall, directly in consequence of such “play” become candidates for gallows and *swing* in that “hereafter.” Yea, LAW in all her majesty may claim, through her righteous judges, ten or twenty years hence, any of these light-hearted “little ones” as her lawful prey. “May God have mercy on your soul” will be the pompous but awful verdict of a black-capped Judge as the logical result of such play for one of those now innocent, then guilty, “Jack Rippers.” Will any of the future judges or jurymen, we wonder, remember during such a possible trial that, when

himself a boy, he may have longed to take the part, nay, perhaps actually has had a hand in the *fun* during a vacation in one of those fashionable seaside resorts?

The child is father to the man. It is the first impressions, visual or mental, which the young senses take in the quickest, to store them indelibly in the virgin memory. It is the imagery and scenes which happen to us during our childhood, and the spirit in which they are viewed by our elders and received by us, that determine the manner in which we accept such like scenes or look upon good or evil in subsequent years. For, it is most of that early intellectual capital so accumulated day by day during our boyhood and girlhood that we trade with and speculate upon throughout later life.

The capacity of children for the storing away of early impressions is great indeed. And, if an innocent child playing at “Jack Ripper,” remarks that his *sport* produces merriment and amusement instead of horror in the lookers-on, why should a child be expected to connect the same act with sin and crime later on? It is by riding wooden horses in childhood that a boy loses all fear of a living horse in subsequent years. Hence, the urchin who now *pretends* to murder will look on murder and kill *de facto*, with as much unconcern when he becomes a man as he does now. There is much sophistry in Mrs. Stowe’s remark that “children will grow up substantially what they *are* by nature,” for this can only apply to those exceptional children who are left to take care of themselves; and these do not buy toys at fashionable shops. A child brought up by parents, and having a home instead of a gutter to live and sleep in, if left to *self*-education will draw from his own observations and conclusions for evil as for good, and these conclusions are sure to colour all his afterlife. Playing at “Jack Ripper,” he will think unconsciously of Jack Ripper, and what he may have heard of that now fashionable Mr. Hyde of Whitechapel. And,

. . . he who but conceives a crime in thought
Contracts the danger of an actual fault.¹



¹ [Quoting Juvenal, Satire xiii, “Terrors of a Guilty Conscience”; tr. Creech.]