A LITTLE BOY AND SANTA CLAUS: BY WALTER A. DYER

ONCE upon a time there was a little boy who believed in Santa Claus. Why he thus believed he did not know. When one is a small boy one finds it easier to believe in things than not. He did not inquire as to the reason for the good Saint's existence. He did not wonder why Santa Claus should choose to be so generous on one particular day. Cause and effect were matters of small importance compared with the net results of sleds and Noah's arks. When Christmas morning came, and the sunlight streaming in through frosted window panes woke the little boy, he made a dash for the mantel where his stocking was hung. There were the jumping-jacks and the Christmas candy, just where he knew they would be—irrefutable evidence of the midnight visit of the good white Saint. Faith in things not seen is in little danger so long as the evidence of things hoped for fails us not. The whole situation suited the little boy, and he believed in Santa Claus.

But he was a very inquisitive small boy, and though the bigger mystery of Santa Claus troubled him not at all, he was a bit perplexed by certain material details. He observed that there was no real fireplace in the house. A scientific turn of mind was his by inheritance, and forced him to pursue his investigations. At length he formulated the important question: How did Santa Claus get in? The grown-ups (they were unusually clever for grown-ups, it seems) told him that Santa Claus could make himself very small at will, and came in through the draughts of the kitchen range, after the fire went out. This proved a satisfactory solution of the problem for a time, as it did not occur to the small boy to inquire whether the grown-ups always allowed the fire to go out on the night before Christmas, though he was a bit puzzled as to how any Saint, even a collapsible Saint, could drag a large sled through a small stovepipe.

Alas! the small boy was born in a scientific and materialistic age, and the spirit of investigation was upon him. He could not let the matter drop. He made an exhaustive study of it, and one by one scented out the flaws in the argument. He took notice of the hesitation of the women grown-ups in answering his questions, and the false notes in the facetious remarks of the men grown-ups. He observed the smile of patronizing superiority on his older sister's face. He began to doubt, and doubt is the beginning of knowledge.

Before many years had passed, he had run the question down, and the grown-ups, finding themselves cornered, were forced to admit that there was no such thing as Santa Claus.

I was that little boy. Ah, well I remember how it seemed that
my heart would break, when I learned the appalling truth. I left
the unsympathetic company of obtuse grown-ups and threw myself
down on the sofa in another room; and turning my face to the wall,
I wept bitterly. I had lost something that day never to be
replaced.

I am not at all in sympathy with those who think it a sin to per-
petuate what they are pleased to refer to as the Santa Claus lie.
Personally, I must confess to a feeling of smallness and awe when
I stand before a child who honestly believes in Santa Claus. And
yet I fear that this hold upon us is weakening. The age of fable has
passed; must old St. Nicholas go, too?

This growing scorn for delightful unrealities gives me some con-
cern, for it is an indication of a psychological change in the human
race that I do not like to contemplate. One by one the myths of
childhood vanish. Bogie-men and fairy godmothers gradually lose
their power over us. One by one, the myths of man depart, and Pan
lies low beneath our hurrying feet. We have put our faith in a God
of gold and steel, and Phoebus no longer rides upon the sunset.

How long will there be among us real children and real poets?
Where now is the poet who can invent a myth, or the child who can
believe in one? “Alice in Wonderland,” I believe, was the last great
mythology. Even “Peter Pan” did not wholly convince us.

“We have played Jack Horner with our earth,” says James
Russell Lowell, lamenting in his Journal, “till there is never a plum
left in it,”—thereby implying, I presume, that each iconoclastic
scientist saith in his stony heart, “Lo, what a brave boy am I!”

The best of our poets have felt alarm at this systematic and pro-
gressive disillusioning of the world.

Thus Poe, to Science:

“Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car?
And driven the Hamadryad from the wood
To seek a shelter in some happier star?
Hast thou not torn the Naiad from the flood,
The Elfin from the green grass, and from me
The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree?”

And thus Wordsworth:

“I’d rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathéd horn.”
A LITTLE BOY AND SANTA CLAUS

It is not the disbelief in these old myths that brings pain; it is the destruction of belief, the breaking down of the idols. It may be fun, but it is short-sighted and silly. I believe I would sooner perjure myself than be the one to tell a child that there is no such thing as Santa Claus. And if your brother believes in the power of prayer, you are a knave if you attempt to shatter his faith. This iconoclasm has gone far enough. Let us build us new idols if we can; at least let us destroy no more old ones.

But we cannot hope to rebuild the faith of the world in myth and fairy lore. The day of miracles has passed. People don’t read poetry any more. People don’t pray any more. This is the age of specialization, and those of us who want our souls to grow must fight always against the tendency of our lives to narrow down to a single channel. For every man there lies a rut ready to receive him.

This is the trend of the times, and it will take patience and much united energy to combat it. The task may be too big for us, but we may be able to do something to prevent our own lives from becoming entirely hardened. And that is what makes this thing worth talking about.

The most materialistic old curmudgeon of us all sometimes looks back with regretful longing toward the fresh, unspoiled, unsophisticated, wondering days of childhood. Indeed, I fancy that some of our modern men and women have reason to indulge in some of this regretful retrospection from about the age of twelve. We envy our earlier selves, and we regret the loss of those very things that we have struggled so valiantly to grow away from.

What is it that makes childhood so alluring? What is it in the old memories that haunts us? Why is it that those halcyon hours come nevermore?

We have been growing old too fast. We have been losing that freshness of interest in all things, that mental alertness, that made us as children, that made earlier peoples, so different from what we are now. Until we regain, by an effort of the will, somewhat of this childlike spirit, we shall continue to plod along, with half of our minds working overtime and the other half asleep.

For one thing, we live too much in cities these days. Cities are manufactured out of material ingredients. Their steel and concrete lives enchant our souls. Myths were never born in cities, but in groves and by the sea. It is there that the imagination is stimulated; there is no such thing as Pan in Wall Street.

Do you remember how you used to lie awake, after they had put you to bed, and weave romances about yourself? Do you remember the countless Indians you slew when you were a little boy, or the
fairy princes that came to woo you when you were a little girl? Now when you lie awake o' nights, you think of business, don't you? Have you ever made an effort to do otherwise? Have you ever tried to put that part of your mind to sleep, by waking up the other part—the old child part that knew how to "pretend"?

I have, and I tell you it pays. I have learned to turn my mind deliberately to a dream I have of a farm in Massachusetts, where I and One Other stand amid our blossoming apple trees and survey the land that is ours. The sound of a cow-bell is blown faintly from over the hill, above which fleecy clouds are lazily drifting. Our dog is dashing madly about the stone-wall on the fancied scent of a woodchuck. Our chickens are busying themselves about their manifold duties. Our Neighbor Jones is driving by to town, and is waving a salute with his whip. Our farmhouse nestles beneath its lofty elms, the picture of content. Oh, it pays to dream of it when the day's work is done, whether there is any substance to the dream or not.

I don't believe there is one of us so steeped in the cares of middle age that we cannot break the chains if we will. If we will—that's the point. Most of us don't even think about doing it. We know that something is wrong with our lives, but we don't stop to study out what it is. But if we will only stop to consider, we shall see that it is possible to make our lives richer by training our minds to be more elastic and our imaginations livelier. The desk-ridden man of fifty, whose joints are growing stiff and whose circulation is becoming defective, can renew his youth and limber up marvelously by a persistent application of the golf cure. He can do the same with his mind—if he will.

We moved our household a little while ago, and as we overhauled our possessions we came upon many things that awakened memories. There were presents that we gave and received on Christmases gone by. There were humble gifts of the days when the pennies meant even more than they do now—gifts that meant sacrifice for love—gifts that fell far short of what we wished we could afford; they were the best we could do. I wonder what it was about those old Christmas presents that made the tears come. I fancy it was the awakened memory of a time when everything meant so much and was so tremendously appreciated. And then and there we registered a prayer that we might never become so rich that Christmas presents would no longer mean sacrifice. It is that simplicity of mind, that appreciativeness of the good that comes, that makes us love Mrs. Wiggs and the Five Little Peppers, and if the day should ever come when that spirit has departed from our Christmases, it will be a sadder day, a thousand times, than the one on which I lost my Santa Claus.