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978-0-521-08166-5 - In Our Infancy: An Autobiography Part 1, 1882-1912
Helen Corke
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INFANCY

An inexperienced, exasperated mother; an unsatisfied, fretful, wailing infant. Born in January, the first three months of my life were spent almost wholly indoors. The later introduction to an out-of-door world may have had its terrors. 'You screamed when I took you out', observed my mother in after years. 'Yes, I wanted to leave you on somebody's doorstep and run away.'

Mercifully we forget the sensations of our first year.

On a June day in 1883, Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, with his wife the Princess Alexandra, came to Hastings for the purpose of opening the public park thereafter known by the Princess's name. My earliest clear recollection is associated with this event. The blank sheet of memory suddenly records a picture of coloured bunting fluttering overhead against a blue sky, and the motion of my perambulator as I am wheeled along a street. Nothing so sharp succeeds this impression until I am in my third year.

An infant's perception relates partly to its inherited background of shadowy, racial images, potent but confused, and its instant apprehension of a momentary experience, pleasant, painful or terrifying. Having no conception of past or future, no power of comparison or scale of values, it is completely engulfed in the sensation of the moment...My second recollection is of my mother's dangling ear-rings, which attract my attention as I sit on her lap. I reach up and grasp one; she cries out and slaps my hand smartly. My world dissolves, and I am lost in a vortex of pain, fear and confusion.

A swing hangs from the kitchen ceiling – my parents' solution to the problem of a ubiquitous toddler. Its painted wooden bars enclose a cushioned seat. Penned into

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the swing I spend the mornings, and wet-weather afternoons, gently swaying between my heaven and earth, the ceiling and floor of the kitchen. Behind me there is a door; those who enter give the swing a little push. Immediately after breakfast I am lifted into the swing, together with my rag doll Molly, a toy rubber cat, and a picture book. The rhymes in the book have been read to me often; I know them by heart, but my interest is sustained; I turn the pages slowly, note the pictures of well-beloved farm animals, and recite the appropriate rhyme for each page. At the end of this ritual the book is dropped on the floor, and my senses begin to register the familiar scene and sounds. In the ceiling I trace, as if with my fingers, the curves of the big black hooks and rings from which the swing hangs. Before me is a large window, its lower panes covered with netting, but the upper ones framing a picture of the sky, blue or cloudy, into which I gaze with a curious pleasure…The warmth of the kitchen comes from my right side, where the fire glows and the boiler bubbles and the kettle steams on the hob. If I glance over my right shoulder I may see Mamma by the white-topped table, ironing, or making pastry, or laying a meal. Much of the morning, while Mamma is busy in bedrooms, I am alone, but not lonely; when people are absent the little voices of friendly Things greet me – purr of kettle, crackle of fire, creak of door and of the ropes of my swing, and other tiny sounds I cannot identify, pricking out of the silence. I am afraid of the voice of Wind, but he is shut outside the house.

Up to three years of age

(By the age of three there was considerable fixation of my impressions, and some classification. Those below were definite.)

Sky and earth. Above and below; upper and under.

Day and night. Light and darkness; waking and sleep.

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Day associated with a wide range of forms, colours, sounds; night with a shadowy bedroom, the candle flame staring from its shelf; bed, and dreams.

Pain. That which compels me to identify myself with my body.

Pleasure. The feeling associated with eating or drinking nice things; with warmth; with the touch of the cat's fur; with being in the open air.

Fear. The immediate reaction to everything strange. Aroused especially by the sound of high wind or heavy rain at night, strangely shaped shadows, odd noises.

My general classification of experiences and things – nice or nasty; with the corresponding but less precise variant – good or bad.

Impressions: four to seven years of age (1886–9)

Family. Mamma, Papa, small brother Arthur, baby Frank, the maid Emily. Grandparents, aunts, uncles; occasionally one or more of these may come to the house, stay a day or two, and depart into the unknown. With my mother's cousin, known to me as Aunt Bec, comes my third cousin, Evelyn; she is taller than me, and a year older. All other people are strangers, and I gather that strangers, on the whole, are not to be trusted; some particularly bad ones, called gipsies, steal children.

People are grown-ups and children; the distinction is not merely one of size and age; the grown-ups are in some undefined way different from *me*. I may play with stranger children only on my birthday, when Mamma gives a party, and I am placed at the end of the tea-table to pour out tea for guests from a small china tea-pot; after tea there are noisy games in which the grown-ups lead. It is so unfamiliar that I am glad when the party is over.

Satisfactions. Nice things to eat; pictures of animals in books; the smooth completeness of a big, shining red

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rubber ball – *mine*; sunlight and warmth; running with my hoop. Also the feeling when I do something which Papa and Mamma approve.

Illness. A dark tide of discomfort, submerging known things; bed in day-time. The obvious impotence of Mamma and Papa to change these conditions. The ceiling, and a flat grey sky pressing against the window. Fear of the strange man they call 'doctor'.

Reading. At four years I am encouraged to spell out words from a primer. '*Now get up. It is six. Is it six? Yes it is, and the dew is off.*' This conversation is accompanied by an illustration showing a mother standing by a child's cot, pointing to a spiky rising sun. The thought of being able to get up at six is most alluring, but the presence of the mother by the child's bedside makes the incident incredible. Eight o'clock is getting-up time, and I must not move from my bed until Emily comes to dress me. I form an impression that the early morning hours, when the sun can be expected to shine as it seldom does on me, hold something of wonder and magic that I am denied.

There are week-day books and Sunday books. I know by heart the rhymes and pictures of the week-day books. Mamma reads to me the Sunday books, until at six years I can read them for myself. They comprise three story books, described on their title pages as *The Earliest Religious Teaching the Infant Mind is Capable of Receiving.* From these I learn that inside me I have a Soul. The suggestion is vague, and unpleasant. What is it like? How can it live shut up in the dark? My little dog, the book continues, has no soul, and will turn to dust when it dies. I have no little dog, but visualise the family cat changing to a small dust heap such as road-sweepers leave about...The books have pictures; the green-covered third primer tells the story of Jesus, shown as a long-haired, long-frocked being, walking ahead of some half-dozen other frocked men with shorter hair and rounder faces. The text reiterates phrases about how kind is Jesus, and how I ought to love him! I cannot feel

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that I do; at most I *like* him, as shown in the picture presenting him with a child seated on his lap. It seems that he lived on the earth long ago, and then went to heaven, which is above the sky. A later chapter of the book tells me that Jesus may come down again at any time, surrounded by winged women angels, who will blow trumpets. Awful things will then happen – the sun will turn black and the moon blood-red, and the stars fall and set the world on fire.

Mamma does not read to me the passages telling of these horrors, but when I am six and read the book for myself they fascinate and terrify me. The prospect is far too appalling to mention to anyone. I try to forget it. But the moon, rising red–gold out of the mist, becomes a dreadful portent. When I see it, through the eastern window, like a red-lined face peeping between the trees, my throat contracts and my heart thumps; I sit down on my stool in the kitchen, averting my face from the window, and gabble over nursery rhymes. Try to think of Goosey Gander, or Mary Quite Contrary in her garden with the silver bells. When bed-time comes, and I must pass the uncurtained landing window, I shut my eyes – yet blink through the lashes to see if the moonlight is blood-red on the stairs. Immense relief – the pallid, ordinary gleam is lying like water on the carpet.

Papa will sometimes read to me from one of his own books. I learn to chant the old rhythm of the Northern peoples used by Longfellow in his *Hiawatha*.

In his lodge beside a river,
Close beside a frozen river,
Sat an old man, sad and lonely,
White his hair was as the snow-drift,
Dull and low his fire was burning,
And the old man shook and trembled
Folded in his Waubewyon,
In his tattered white-skin wrapper,
Hearing nothing but the tempest
As it roared along the forest,
Seeing nothing but the snowstorm,
As it whirled and hissed and drifted.

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I pore over the accompanying illustration. It is all there – the wigwam under the gaunt, wind-torn tree, looming through the snowfall, the old man stretching thin hands towards his little fire. Papa, reading of the old Indian, becomes queerly identified with him, and the story itself with something of mine partaking of feeling and memory, but beyond the consciousness of both. The small, thick volume of Longfellow, with ornate cover design and shining gilt edges takes a higher place in my scale of book values than the toy and story books, though these have larger print and coloured pictures.

Imagination. Everything in my world puts on personality when I contemplate it. The chair can think and feel, the ball wants or does not want to run away. The dolls, Amy, Molly, Sylvia; my hoop Strong-troller and hoop-stick Stick-switcher are my companions – better company than the small, stolid brother with whom I must play simple games that I find very dull. Hoop and stick talk to each other, and I to them – and yet, when I *think* about it, I am fully aware that all the talking and feeling that seems to be theirs really goes on inside *me*. The dolls are good, but Amy is stupid. Strong-troller is sometimes a bad hoop, and runs away from me. I tell Stick-switcher to beat him nearly to death when he is caught; Stick-switcher beats until Strong-troller cries for mercy.

The human personnel of my sixth year. Mamma, dominant, always at hand; Papa, not so omnipresent, less insistent, beneficent and wise; the ultimate authority. Three-year-old Arthur, with clumsy, stout legs, and fat, pink, pouched cheeks. The maid, Emily, whose *tightness* impresses me unpleasantly; her hair sticks tightly to her head on either side of a white parting, and its ends are twisted into a tight little bob behind; she is buttoned tightly into her black dress. Other members of the family make occasional appearances – a thin, black-clothed, white-

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haired grandfather, two grandmothers with wrinkled faces, the one having brown eyes, and small brown curls dipping on either side of her face from beneath a black net cap, the other with grey hair smoothed under a white stiff lace cap, and having a small mole, out of which grows a single hair, beside her mouth. Gold watch-chains dangle from both grandmothers, and rings are on their fingers; these are features of Mamma also, on Sundays. Of the incidental aunts and uncles who make rare appearances, Aunt Bec, the mother of my cousin Evelyn, is predominant. I like Aunt Bec, whose presence makes one feel safe and quiet, much more so than that of Mamma. Of all my world, my cousin Evelyn is nearest me in the sense of mutual understanding, except that she cries frequently, and without shame – this is strange to me. She has golden-brown ringlets and large grey eyes; is a year older than me, and writes me tiny, carefully pencilled notes on midget sweet-scented notepaper, which come enclosed in Aunt Bec's letters to Mamma.

We have a tall house on a hillside. It is built over a shop; the shop door opening on to the street. The kitchen is behind the shop; the sitting-room above it, and there are two stories of bedrooms. I sleep in a gabled room on the third floor. Bed-time is horrid; one shivers on leaving the warm kitchen, where one has been bathed by the fire, to travel up the flights of steep, dark stairs, preceded by Emily carrying a candle. On the opposite side of the top landing is the store-room, where sacks of peas and beans, and tall sugar loaves in blue wrappings are kept till wanted in the shop. There is an empty iron bedstead, and a bicycle with one big and one little wheel. The bicycle is Papa's, but Mamma does not like him to ride it, and it seldom goes out. In the day-time Arthur and I may play in this room – or we sit on the bean sacks by the window, feeling high up, looking over the tree-tops in the wood beyond a disused sand-pit. But at night the room is always dark, pitch-dark, and I, lying

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awake among the shadows of my own room (the pea-point of a tiny lamp flame burns on the wash-stand) hear rustling and movement, mysterious, coming from behind its closed door…I seldom sleep at once. Out in the night the trains puff along up the High Brooms gradient. My ears strain to the first puff and rumble, my heart beats to the acceleration of sound…louder…louder…not quite so loud …passing away. I *will* go to sleep before the next train comes…One Sunday evening Papa and Grandpa talk of a recent earthquake in the news – I carry the idea of a new terror to bed. Earthquake is some great dreadful thing that has killed people – might a train bring it? I fancy the sound of the wheels getting louder, louder than usual. Surely it is making my bed shake! I cower under the clothes – will the walls of the house fall like those of Jericho when the priests blew with the trumpets (this is pictured in the Sunday book)! I hear, suddenly, the knocking of my heart; the train rumble recedes.

One may go into the shop when there are no customers on the far side of the red-brown counter; should a customer enter, one sits down under the counter on a sack of dried peas, close to the fruit and sugar drawers. One drawer holds lump cubes, representing the final stage of the tall sugar loaves that stand in the store-room – the sugar-chopper waits at one end of the counter. Another drawer has soft, sandy-brown sugar, a third raisins, a fourth currants. Behind the counter rise the shining black and silver tea canisters on their out-of-reach shelves; under them small drawers containing queer things – black, strong-smelling stuff, cinnamon in broken sticks. All this territory is intimate; that beyond the counter is alien land, reached only when the counter flap is raised and its spring door opened. Cold it is beyond the counter, and unprotected; the outer door of the shop is open to strangers, their dogs, and the wind that rushes down the hillside. Sacks of potatoes stand by the door, strings of pegs and onions

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dangle from the ceiling; on the shelf by the counter are boxes of hard, chalky, pink and white sweets I am told not to eat. Up and down the length of boarded floor, always rather dirty, one may run for exercise on wet days when the shop is empty. The top window shelf bears a row of mineral water bottles, which make one feel happy when the light shines through them, amber, rose, and deep green, late on a winter afternoon.

Certain other things evoke a haunting happiness – dripping water, saffron piles of cloud floating in blue heaven, a bell ringing in the distance, shop-window lights gleaming on wet pavements...It is by their atmosphere that these things are perceived, sensitively, not with any intellectual grasp of their properties and characteristics. By keen, direct, sensuous reaction, of which adult memory holds but a vague suggestion, I am aware of the external world. Things attract or repel with greater or lesser intensity. Of the vanished apprehensions belonging to early childhood I can dimly recall one only in later life – a strange excitement evoked by the first hoar frosts of autumn, by the glitter of frost upon fallen leaves in my path and the nip of frosty morning air.

Pity awakens during my sixth year. For tiny, thin-legged birds, bright-eyed and fearful, that hop to the window-sill, hoping for crumbs. For little brown mouse, quivering behind bars of trap, mouse panting in an ecstasy of fear, brought down from the store-room in the trap. Mamma says she is glad it is caught, and it will be given to the cat. Cats were made to catch mice. She will not let me take it into the yard and set it free. The small, lonely mouse, all alone to itself and its fear! I offer it some crumbs, but dare not rescue it, and choke down the lump in my throat, hating my mother's power and my own helplessness.

Two boys live in the neighbouring house. I see them often, playing in their garden. One day they call to me, 'Come and see the execution!' I run to the fence. They have

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a frog, tied by its legs, stretched on the palings; it struggles, feebly waving its queer little hands. I beg them to let it go, but one boy takes his pen-knife and slits the frog's belly. I rush indoors, sobbing wildly, and ignoring Mamma, burst into the shop, demanding that Papa shall kill those boys. Mamma follows, and both parents try to soothe me – yes, the boys were cruel, and Papa will speak to their father about it, but I must *not* make that dreadful noise! I repeat my demand and continue repeating it until through the paroxysm of pity I am able to sense the extreme annoyance of Mamma, and the shocked face of Papa. Then comes the realisation, slow but abiding, that to them my loss of self-control is a worse matter than the cruelty of the boys.

I see morning sunshine only through the window of the sitting-room or the shop; but on fine afternoons we go out with Emily, Arthur in his 'pram' and I with a hand on its handlebars. The longest walk is to the Common, where I may bowl my hoop. The Common is a vast place of grassy hollows, tree-crowned hills, and grey rocks standing in soft, loose sand. Other children dig in the sand with wooden spades, making sand pies in their pails. We are forbidden to touch the sand, which Mamma says is dirty; we linger on the grass edge, envying, but feeling superior. More attractive to me are the rock slabs, with the slippery little paths running up and over them. I should love to climb, slowly and carefully, to the top. The Common stretches away to the rim of the sky, all ups and downs, dark patches, light patches; distant hills and trees lean against heaven. One hill – which, I wonder – we sing about in chapel:

> There is a green hill far away,
> Without a city wall.

(But why should the hymn remark thus upon the absence of a city wall?)

More often our walk is only a dawdle along shopping streets. On afternoons in winter Emily will make a detour to

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