

Phase Two

WHEN HE DECIDES

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HT was a clever, actively thinking, handsome lad of sixteen who suggested to my mind the train of thought which led me to feel that there were certain things it might be good to say on the subject of this period in a boy's life—when he decides.

“I sometimes think,” he said, with a half-humorous, half-troubled knitting of a very fine pair of straight black brows, “I often think that perhaps it would be a good idea for a fellow to be buried when he was fifteen and not dug up again until after he was twenty. It's so hard for a boy to know just exactly what it is best to do.”

He was quoting some one with an easy sense of humor who had suggested the temporary interment method as a way of dis-

posing of a difficulty. And the fact that his mind recurred to it, even though half in jest, was all the more suggestive, as he was not an unfortunate and unhappy boy, but an exceptionally fortunate one. He was clever, surrounded with advantages, strong, good-looking, and the lucky possessor of parents intelligent enough and sufficiently well placed to be able to aid in the carrying out of any plan he formed.

But being an intelligent young thing, at sixteen, he felt that he had reached the point where a man—though he is still only a school-boy—must begin to decide. With him the questions he had to decide were some of them much simpler than those many boys of his age struggle with. “At which university shall I gain most?” does not seem a difficult question, if, the choice being made, all the rest is arranged simply. “In what profession can I achieve most?” is not appalling as a query, if, a decision again being arrived at, the steps necessary to be taken toward enter-

ing the profession are quite possible. To a boy like himself perhaps the most trying questions are the deciding of mental problems, problems of a growing mind, even points of good manners and good taste, and of adjusting one's youthful self to a world yet too mature to be met easily.

But his intelligence was so far awakened and disturbed by this sense of being on the threshold of the universe that he was finding his decisions anxious enough things. When he decides, a boy may do it at fifteen, at eighteen, at twenty—there are even children who do it in their early years when no one suspects them of the audacity—but sooner or later to a boy who is of the material which makes the men who count as individuals in the great working, advancing world the hour of decision must come, and he must abide by the results, whatsoever they may be.

There has long existed a rather generally accepted theory that from fifteen to twenty years of age a boy is frequently, if not in-

variably, an uninteresting and unprepossessing object. Has any one ever thought of him as pathetic, sometimes overburdened, sometimes even tragic? He is so young—but he is too old to conduct himself as a child or think as a child; he is so old—and yet if he speaks as a man or acts as one he becomes a pretentious seeming and ridiculous object. He may chance to be slow in maturing and be young for his years, and then his people are disappointed in him. He may have the young mind of a man and be full of thought and, perhaps, incoherent opinion, and then if he is not fortunate in having clever, perceptive, and sympathetic friends and relatives he is despised and laughed at as a young prig. He is battling his way through a chaos of development, and how is it possible for him to remain passive and express nothing of what he thinks of the mental *phantasmagoria* which seems passing before him for the first time to his consciousness? And he must decide.

If at sixty he might decide what he would be at sixteen it might not be such a tremendous question. But at sixteen, at eighteen, he must decide what he will be at sixty and at eighty.

Before him stretch all the long years of life, years of thought, of work, of attainment, or years of blighted hope, of struggle and failure and useless despair. Those years may hold so much! And behind him lie his poor, young sixteen or eighteen birthdays, more than half of them the birthdays of a child, and his experience is all that lies between them. And yet he must decide.

And somehow so few people seem to think it is grave, that it is tremendous, that it may be tragic.

If he is a thinking creature, and many, many of them are, even those who are scarcely conscious of it themselves, all the warm kindness the love nearest to him can give, all the intelligently perceptive sympathy that can encourage and uphold, all the

cleverness in aid the most brilliant among his friends can enrich him with, the poor child needs to support him in this hour—when he decides.

And surely it is he, and he alone, who is entitled to the privilege of doing this. There are those, no doubt, who grow up without forming any definite tastes or plans, and who develop no predilections; there are, perhaps, also those who are mentally indolent and prefer that the decisions should be made for them. Of those one may possibly say without injustice that they are not of the material which will be likely to make its maturity a power either in one direction or another. If those who decide for them act with intelligence they may be guided toward some career in which they may lead simple, respectable, if unimportant, lives which, as they are productive of no harm, may almost be counted as productive of good. They will at least, in a measure, represent the ciphers which, being added to the units, give value.

But there are others who, during all the young, growing years, are—at first unconsciously, but later consciously—forming the tastes which become predilections in favor of one career or another. And it is when this is the case that the person in authority, who selfishly or unwisely interferes without mercy, becomes a criminal and a fool.

These are serious words, and used with the serious intention of conveying their full force. They are the result of the gravest thought, a line of thought which has led to the tragic conclusion that there exist, unhappily, parents who are unconsciously criminals, and parents who are unconsciously fools. It must be true that crime and folly are always unconscious of themselves. Tragic as the truth is in its suggestion, it is a truth that the fact that a man or woman is a parent does not invariably prove that he or she is ruled by intelligence or morality. If it did, every blossoming soul would be given its sunshine and dew and shade, every young

mental bloom would be led through its seed-time to harvest, all lives would develop to the best and brightest they could attain on earth, and the millennium would have come. But the millennium is not here, and there are fathers to whom a mere chance of parenthood has given authority without intelligence, mothers who, through the same chance, have power without having soul or brain.

And it is such exceptions as these—let us implore Heaven to grant that they are rare exceptions—who now and then insist that this accident of authority entitles them to decide the future of a life upon its threshold—a life whose disappointments and burdens it will not be theirs to bear; and generally to decide this future through the promptings of some caprice, some imbecile vanity or prejudice, or some sordid whim, that often has neither reason nor excuse for existence.

“I want you to advise me about my son,” wrote a fatuous female of this order to a well-known literary man. “I am dreadfully

worried about him. He is a good boy, but he does not want to take my advice. I want him to go into a dry-goods store, but he wants to be a physician. What can I do to eradicate this tendency?"

Before a stupidity so gross one laughs as at any imbecile crudeness, but it is with tears in one's eyes if one thinks of the story behind it. Imagination pictures to one the poor, silly, provincial feminine thing, all of whose ideas of success are limited to achievements in the dry-goods business, which, though a very good business, is not the one her son prefers.

And through all his developing years she has been the ruling power in the life of a boy studious, mentally tending toward scientific interests. It may be full of genius and deep thought. She cannot understand him, he is not old enough to understand her; she is too unintelligent not to torment and harass him, he is probably too immature to rise above her irritating hen-like flutterings. She does

him mental and moral harm, and because she is a fool—if she is a maternally well-meaning fool—she is wildly anxious.

It might have chanced that this boy's tastes had been mercantile, that he had been full of business instincts and executive ability, and it might have chanced that his mother's idea of respectability had been the medical profession. She might have resented the dry-goods business as unaristocratic, and have insisted on medical lectures and the study of drugs. In that case he would still have been equally the victim, and she, poor soul, equally the fool. The boy whose tastes were for business might have measured calico and sold tape in the provincial shop as the first step on the high-road leading to the great world, where he might have reigned later as a merchant prince, the mover in great business schemes of use to many, the gainer of great wealth which, through his employment of it passed from hand to hand, supplied

work to workers, gave aid to need, helped the big world to move.

And this frail, unintelligent creature who had taken it upon herself to decide for him would have been the means of forcing him to be an inferior in a profession when he might have been a power in the world of trade, just as she might make an incapable tradesman of a boy who might have won fame and aided a whole suffering world as a man of science. In each case she would have made a life a tragedy. What tragedy could be greater than a life of failure which might have been a life of success? And in each case the man who lived the life, not the one who decided his fate, would be the bearer of the suffering the tragedy implied.

One can readily imagine such a woman looking on with uncomprehending discontent at the troubles and failures as they dragged themselves out from year to year.

“Somehow Jem never did get on,” she

would say. "He hasn't any faculty for making his way like other men."

And she would be totally unconscious that it was she—her poor unintelligent mother—self—who had hung her feeble but obstinate predilections like a ball and chain about his feet, forcing his footsteps to slowness and faltering when they might have been swift and strong.

Almost every one among his acquaintances can recall, if he pauses to reflect, one or more cases of lives more or less failures of which he has heard it said: "He wanted very much to be this or that thing, but his family were opposed to it." I say that almost every one knows of some such case, but I do not believe that any one has heard it said of a successful and happy man: "His tastes lay all in the direction of a totally different career, but his people were determined not to allow it, and the result is that he is perfectly happy and successful in the life they chose for him."

There might be, though I beg leave to doubt it gravely, a case of a boy who, having been filled with longings for other things, was coerced by his rulers, or by circumstances, into becoming a pork-packer, or having a desire to be a pork-packer was persuaded by his relatives to enter a career of art, and in after years won the success which brings money, but one might be quite sure that his life was a failure and an unsatisfied thing. The life that fails is the life that is unsatisfied in longings which might have been fulfilled.

It is not unnatural that a man who is a scholar or an artist should prefer that his son's tastes should be somewhat like his own; it is not unnatural that an energetic business man, if he is not an intellectual person also, should feel that the son who leans toward art in literature, painting, or the drama is something of an unpractical dreamer. But in both cases the life to be decided is the one still to be lived and endured or enjoyed, and

it is not the life of the father or mother—it is that of the boy.

“What are you going to make of this remarkable boy?” some one asked a literary parent.

“What am I going to make of him!” was the answer. “Nothing. I hope to be able to form an intelligent character for him, and then see what he will make of himself.”

“But don’t you wish him to take to literature?”

“If that is his natural inclination I should be delighted. But he might prefer to be a butcher.”

“And in that case?”

“I shall endeavor to help him to secure a butcher’s shop in the best possible business situation, and try to invest his legs of mutton with an air of picturesque distinction. I suppose that—with an effort—one might surround beefsteaks with an almost dramatic and literary atmosphere.”

The years in which a man prepares for his

future are so few and short, the years during which he bears the consequences of that preparation often seem so long, so long. No man can afford to waste one of the short years in battling for what should be his own.

Years ago a boy whose earliest childhood had been colored by his passion for dramatic art announced to his parents that he wished to become an actor. They were gentle people, whose lives had been extremely narrow, though they had been spent in a great metropolis, which is one of the centers of the world. They were horrified by the idea. They thought the dramatic profession immoral, detrimental in every respect, and lowering from a social point of view. Though of an entirely different class from that of the parent who tended toward the dry-goods business, they thought that such a tendency should be eradicated. A strong-willed father and a weak-willed, timid mother did their best to eradicate it. The father sighed, reproached, satirized, and stormed; the mother

wept. The boy struggled to explain his convictions and support his position. One might write a tragic story of such a struggle, but this is only a brief illustrative sketch. The boy was totally dependent, high-spirited, proud, and helpless. He had the artist temperament, and was capable of keenest suffering. He was willing to begin at the lowest round of the ladder and work his way up. His was not a boyish caprice. He was not pretentious, and was deeply in earnest. At the outset he had the courage to get a small engagement in spite of opposition. The beginning was modest, but he had not expected to do more than gain a foothold. His practical and artistic use of his opportunity was such as promised well. But the feeling in his home circle was too strong. His father was furious, his mother grieved until he felt himself a criminal. If he had been a lion of strength or had been heartlessly indifferent he might have held out. But he was neither. He suffered tortures, and in despair gave way.

After ten years or more of uncertainty, commonplace miseries, and the humiliation of always feeling himself out of place and a failure, his circumstances became so hopeless that he felt himself forced to try again at the one thing he knew he might have done well. But the difference between entering a profession at thirty and at twenty is a tremendous one.

“If I could go back ten years!” was his cry. “I know it would be all right if I could go back ten years. But I can’t—I can’t!”

His strong-willed father and his affectionate, weak-willed mother, who had years enough of their own, had taken those ten years from him. They had obliged him to fritter them away as if they had been grains of sand, instead of a chaplet of pearls. They are old people, whose lives are drawing to a close; his is yet to be borne to the end. He is a young man still, but he is embittered and broken by discouragement. He has not the hopefulness of youth, he has not even the

hopefulness of manhood. I sometimes wonder what the Power, who demands account of things, will demand in exchange for those ten years. And yet these were not consciously bad or heartless people; they were only stupid and selfish, and personal in a comfortable, parental, domestic way.

This is only one of several cases of which I, myself, have known the details, and yet I cannot help but believe, as well as hope, that such cases are exceptions. As the days have gone by when the explosive old comedy father commanded his son or daughter with suitable profanity to enter into a matrimonial alliance upon the spot with the heiress or heir whose fortune he considered a good thing to have in the family, or whose acres he desired to add to his own, so I think the obstinate and unintelligent parent is becoming a belated institution. But that these exceptions still exist we all know, and it is to these exceptions I take the liberty of speaking. It was not your child, but you yourself,

who decided that he should bear the burden of life—the helplessness of childhood, the mistakes of inexperienced youth, the disappointments of maturity, the certainty of death—and all these having been forced upon him it is he, and he alone, who should be allowed the right to decide under what circumstances he will endure or make the best and highest of them that he may. Give him all the help his youth needs and your maturity can supply; give him all the love, sympathy, and tenderness of your wisest, most unselfish, and purely impersonal self. But when this is done, and well done, in the name of justice let him decide, and when he has decided, do all you can to encourage him by loving, tender, and sympathetic words of advice and encouragement.