

Experience will often contradict Expectations

The sibling children of Kenneth Grahame's *The Golden Age*, ranging in age from 6 to 11, had lived among the adults of their household long enough to acquire a critical attitude toward them all. As the narrator says, "Their elders had so much apparent liberty compared to a child, they might dabble in the pond all day, hunt chickens, climb trees, yet they never did any one of these things. On the whole they seemed to be entirely void of interests, even as their movements were confined and slow and their habits stereotyped and senseless. To anything but appearances they were blind. For them the orchard (a place elf-haunted, wonderful) simply produced so many apples and cherries or it didn't. They were unaware of Indians, nor recked they anything of bison or pirates, though the whole place swarmed with such portents."

Needless to say then, when told that an uncle just returned from India was about to visit their home, they jumped to critical conclusions. They had met other uncles as inadequate as the adults they lived with. "For example there was Uncle Thomas - a failure from the first . . . his rooted conviction seemed to be that the reason for a child's existence was to serve as a butt for senseless adult jokes." And then there was the younger Uncle George, who at first showed some promise, allowing the children to introduce him to their pets, until he met their governess Miss Smedley, from which moment on "Uncle George's manner underwent a complete and contemptible change".

Their expectations of this new Uncle William were therefore low. Throughout the course of his stay they couldn't quite make up their minds about him, but in the end (after he had departed for the train station accompanied under orders by their younger sibling Harold) the rest of the children were about to rate him negatively, when Harold returned and stood speechless before them. Then "slowly drawing his hand from his pocket, he displayed on a dirty palm one-two-three-four half-crowns!" "Buy what you like," Uncle William had said. "Make little beasts of yourselves - only don't tell the old people, mind!" Small Charlotte said dreamily, "I didn't know that there were such good men anywhere in the world. I hope he'll die tonight, for then he'll go straight to heaven!"

All of which seems to show it's not wise to fall into a persistently critical or hopeless attitude toward everything and everyone. People and reality may surprise us if we can get over this habit we acquire so early in life of never giving them the benefit of the doubt. An author much appreciated by my wife (and please don't ask me his name) says that when Jesus looked out upon the crowds around him with compassion, it doesn't mean he looked upon them with a presumptuous pity but that he simply saw in them so many possibilities for good and longed to see them realized. He longed to see them become the unique miracle each could be. In other words, he saw more than meets the usually critical or passive eye we all possess - even as in viewing a few loaves and fishes he easily saw resources ample enough to feed five thousand souls!

One of the most difficult things confronting me in this extremely negative, judgmental age in which we live is to pass from a critically righteous to a Christic

(merciful, hopeful, affirmative, joyful, constructive) perception of people and reality. How important it is that I do so - if only to avoid the fate of the littlest of the children in our story, the repentant Selina, who “bewailed herself with tears and sobs, refusing to be comforted; for that in her haste she had called this white-souled relative a beast.”