Life With Father: A Critical Essay

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"Forthright, downright, upright (is) Father (in this) beguiling book of sketches about life with that gusty household tyrant of the eighties." 1 Those of us who made the acquaintance of Clarence Day senior in "God And My Father" are glad to meet again this "irascible, loud-voiced family tyrant," 2 and will certainly not be disappointed in the amount of fun, verve, and innocent hilarity with which Clarence Day junior has packed every chapter of "Life With Father."

Clarence Day junior, author and cartoonist, was born in New York city, in 1874. His heritage, a good one, makes it seem not at all surprising that he became a writer. Benjamin Day, his grandfather, was founder of the "New York Sun," and Ben Day, his uncle, was originator of the engraving process which today bears his name. As Day junior was the son of a well-to-do family (his father was a Wall street broker), no special praise is due him for any spectacular climb into a place in New York society. He attended St. Paul's school, in New Hampshire, before graduating from Yale and receiving a seat on the New York stock exchange as a gift from his father. This gift was not truly an appreciated one, however, and soon Day junior rebelled and (as so many young men are wont to do) joined the navy. Life on a training ship proved a jinx for it was there that Day contracted the arthritis which made him an invalid for the rest of his life. His indomitable will undaunted, Day bought a ranch and went for daily rides about it propped upon a pony. Even when he returned to New York his condition made it impossible for him to return to his father's business, and he turned to writing. As secretary of his class of Yale alumni, he startled his fellow members by compiling actual facts about them instead of the usual ribald nonsense. Though Day was quite surprised to find his short stories and poems accepted and published, he took advantage of his talent and soon became conductor of the book department for the "Metropolitan magazine," and, until he was discharged, a writer of financial material on the "New Republic." Until he proved his talent by launching his literary career at the comparatively youthful age of thirty-six, with "This Simian World," he wrote short sketches and verses which he illustrated with "Sinister drawings of shapeless men and beasts." 3 Day's family never approved of his writing and he moved to an apartment on Riverside Drive where he lived with his wife and small daughter. His death, following an attack of bronchial pneumonia, came in December, 1935, soon after the publication of the currently popular "Life With Father."

Although Clarence Day Jr. was physically an invalid, he lived his mental life with the points of view and interests of a man in perfect health. He "gave back life to his parents and youth to his mother. This was done with affection and gave a touch of loveliness and unsweetened tenderness." 4 Yet with all this, Day did not reminisce in a manner which ordinarily leaves a bad taste in one's mouth. A realist living in a world of realism, "he obviously enjoyed the here and now and knew that flesh has always been heir to aches and pains. He was (definitely) a philosopher, not a sentimentalist," 5 and "few have had his telescopic vision for the human being behind every situation." 6 His kindliness was American, his pessi-
ism the hedging of an optimist who saw that human nature would never catch up with its promises; his humor was the delight in paradox of a man who had lived all his life in a comfortable society that was quite sure it was master of its own fate. He was twentieth century America philosophizing upon the nineteenth, satiric, yet sympathetic, in a way in which no man of a leaner, less humorous time will ever be able to equal.

And so Clarence Day Jr.'s story of life with his father embodies a flavor of the social history of the day that seems ages past when "fathers commanded, children obeyed, and mild mothers slyly ruled both," with his memories of the "humorous, kind-hearted man whose loud dominance did not make his wife afraid of him and whose tyrannical dealing with his sons did not spoil their admiration for him." One reads the first chapter of the book with qualms as to the course of the remaining chapters. The lines of the pictures smack of revolt—of monkey shines. But soon the author begins to roll into one episode after another with father appearing in all of them true to his character—moody, good and bad humored, roaring, swearing; in fact, sometimes one suspects him of being irrational. The book has no plot, just a wide range of subjects which cover nearly everything—from father almost killed riding Rob Roy (the horse that was quite as stubborn as father) to father charging into an employment agency and demanding of the astonished clerk, "Where do you keep 'em—the cooks?" He found one and she remained twenty-six years before departing for the place in Heaven that father was sure God had reserved for her.

Clarence Day Sr., with his offices in Wall street and his clubs ("What the saloon was to poor men and what coffee houses were to Londoners, his club was to father") a fixed part of his life, believed that the father's world was law, and women who studied current events wasted their time in reading them and his in discussing them (he firmly believed that Woodrow Wilson was an anarchist.). He opined that God had made several classes and that the working man should keep his place. In fact, "his main principle of life was that there should be no nonsense about it. No principle ever took a stiffer beating." Even God didn't offer the proper cooperation, and more than once when father was suffering with one of his roaring headaches did his family hear him shout, "Have mercy. I say have mercy, damn it!" "As piety, that is deplorable. As characterization it is magnificent." Father was a typical member of Victorian society. When he came home after a hard day at his offices he felt that he had every right to expect to find a household that showed some semblance of sanity. Did he find it? Definitely no. More often than not the house appeared to be a stage set for scenes bordering on any one of "the infinite varieties of pandemonium!" That really left him in the position of a staunch windmill, with a family full of Quixotes forever tilting at him. Imagine the slightest traces of sanity in a household where Clarence Sr. was constantly opening Clarence Jr.'s mail, where Clarence Sr. was always receiving and declining invitations to lunch with total strangers. That telephone was a "damned nuisance" and father expected every call to be for him. Imagine father arriving home to find guests in the house. He heartily disapproved of guests. His remedy for them was either to send them to a hotel or to put them on some train headed for a large and very empty desert. "If they wanted to roam, the damn gypsies, give 'em a hand, let 'em roam." If it wasn't one type of guest, it was another. "Dear Vinnie," his wife, might be
giving a musicale. How father hated having his home cluttered up with musicians. Even if there were no guests father might expect no end of trouble just with the family. Perhaps it was the fabulously inexpensive rug that mother had bought at a fabulously expensive price from an obliging Armenian. Any one of these things were capable (and often did) of sending father into a blithering rage, when he had arrived in search of a "little damned peace."

There we have father for what he really is—a living man. "He is not a humorous subject, certainly not a potted parent, but one of those justly perceived human beings who brim with life, who over-ride others by sheer exuberance, so intent on living that they never mirror the other mind or other will, getting their own way by tactics often hugely infantile, triumphing over all of them' (by irrationality), unless a wife oppose them by another irrationality, this time feminine, or else a David come along with the sling of a comedy and lay the giant low." He was ruled by being humored (little did he realize it) as his wife lived her own life and his children obeyed him, all the while taking care not to let him sap their personalities of originality.

There isn't much more to say about "Life With Father" than has already been said with sturdy conviction. Critics have unanimously admired the book, as I do now, and have reviewed it more competently and thoroughly than I could possibly. Each of them has the same idea as to the practical value of the book as ato its splendidly written chain of incidents.

With its setting in one of the world's largest cities during the most interesting and enjoyable period of American life in the last century, this story without a plot carries its reader breathlessly through from chapter one to the last paragraph.

If there is an outstanding fault in the book it is that it is too noisy. At times it makes one tend to hold his ears. It is the kind of book one wants to read aloud so that he may laugh with his listener without being thought foolish. No one can read the book and not say of at least one chapter, "Why, he must have been thinking of our family when he wrote this."

The book is homey, yet it is like a thriller—windy, noisy, over in a hurry, and you want to go again.

Footnotes

2. Booklist, 32:10, Sept. '35.

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