

BARUS (Annie H.)

The Woman's  
Anthropological Society,

WASHINGTON, D. C.

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BULLETIN No. V.

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The History of a Child's Passion.

A CONTRIBUTION TO THE SECTION OF  
CHILD-LIFE STUDY.

MARCH 2, 1895.

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ANNIE HOWES BARUS.



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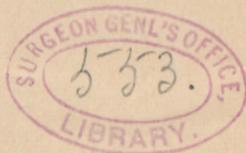
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## THE HISTORY OF A CHILD'S PASSION.

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The interest in bottles shown since the earliest months of babyhood by my little boy has been so continuous and intense as to well deserve the name of passion.

The child is five and a half years old. He now takes an active interest in toys, and will, when allowed, spend hours by himself constructing temples and palaces with his tile-blocks; but as a younger child he discarded all playthings for his favorite bottles.

From his birth I have kept a biographical record of phases of his development. This passion for bottles being somewhat unique, I noted the several stages of its progress. Family tradition on the paternal side tells of a similar devotion in childhood by the child's father, who remembers that at twelve it was the height of his ambition to become a druggist—the possessor of a shopful of bottles and mixtures.

There has been no special stimulus to the "bottle" fancy in the home surroundings. Those the child secured came mostly from the family medicine shelf in the closet, or were begged from the cook's store in the pantry. There is no doubt that the bottle mania was a spontaneous development, and was persisted in despite of many allurements in other directions. There was no check placed upon this mental bias, as I wished to watch its development, and, despite the inevitable falls and breakages of such fragile toys, he never came to harm in his play with them—the caution necessary to exercise for their safety forming one of their attractions.

The first note entered in my biography as to bottles was at *6 months and 10 days*. I wrote of his fear when placed near a large green bottle. His lime-water was kept in this gallon bottle, and, although afraid of it, it possessed a fascination for him. He

would intimate his wish to see it by stretching toward it, and then draw back with a cry when brought too close.

By the close of the first year we had come to recognize his marked preference for bottles as strongly characteristic, and at *13 months* he began to personify them, patting and hugging them as if they were alive. The nursing bottle never was adopted as a plaything, and he never showed any interest in it apart from his meals. When he was *14 months* old, I wrote that he was very quick to detect even the slightest resemblance to the form of a bottle in all objects about him. He became at this time especially interested in a figure of the carpet which he called "bum-ba" (bottle). At *a year and a half* he used to run into my closet and, pulling aside my dresses, peek at the big green bottle, which still possessed a powerful fascination for him, though he had lost his terror of it. He used to beg to be lifted up to see a little bottle on the medicine shelf which could only be discovered by peeking around a corner. The mystery he attached to these bottles seemed their chief attraction. He would repeat the peek-a-boo game a dozen times or more. In fact, my patience and strength never held out till the end of his enjoyment. When he alluded to these particular bottles, he cocked his head always on one side to express the fact of seeing them around the corner. At this time also, if he could have the bottles placed upon the floor, he would climb into his low rocking-chair, sway to and fro beside them by the hour, gazing in rapt adoration. Three months later (*21 months 5 days*) he begged to have his bottles go out to ride in his carriage with him, and on going to bed or out of doors he gravely bowed to them and said, "Bye-bye." This salute was his own suggestion. At *22 months* his first intimation of dreaming is associated with a bottle. On awakening he said: "Baby broke 'med' bumba" (medicine bottle). As he had been playing with it the night before, I presumed he had, but I found the bottle intact. He had cried out "No, no!" in a distressed way during his sleep, and the dream was evidently still vivid enough to be mistaken for reality.

His passion in his *27th month* was concentrated on a blacking bottle. He used to affectionately kiss the splashes of blacking. The feeling of having to be exceedingly cautious in his handling

of the bottle appeared to be its chief charm. As there was a little liquid blacking still in the bottle, he was warned not to drop it. Two months later "broken bottle" (a cologne bottle with its head knocked off, and which required much skill and manipulation to keep it on) superseded the blacking bottle in his affections. During an attack of grippe he sat at this time, the greater part of three days, in my lap caressing this bottle. On a low sewing-table, considered his especial property, he kept arranged in precise order, on the yard-line marked off on the table, 4 bottles, 2 bits of tinsel paper, a scrap of ribbon, a braid bobbin, a handkerchief generally spread so that it partly hung off the table, and several blocks. The proper and due ordering of this arrangement seemed of great significance. It was impossible not to feel that there was much in this mystic arrangement that was akin to the decorative embellishments of their fetiches by savages. He learned very readily the names of the contents, or rather of the previous contents, of his bottles, not hesitating to glibly slip off so many syllabled a word as Dobell's Solution or Ammonia.

A couple of weeks later (*29 months 3 weeks*) a turpentine bottle replaced the "broken bottle" in his affections. "Sting bottle" he called it, in remembrance of its stinging qualities when applied to his throat.

A three-months stay in the country at this time somewhat dissipated his interest in bottles, although, even with all the allurements of out-of-door life at the sea-shore, occasional longings for bottles would recur. On the journey homeward a silver travelling flask, with a quaint stopple, was dubbed Captain Whiskey, and a bottle of salts, on account of its crown-shape stopper, was called Queen Violet, and the two succeeded in beguiling the tedious hours of the long rail ride.

After this, for some time, the bottle especially attractive at the time had to be brought to the table to share his meals, and he would more readily obey if the bottles might "watch him."

I made special note one day, shortly after his third birthday, of having taken down from the shelf, at his earnest entreaty, three broken bottles to watch him eat his breakfast. Back of them he espied on the shelf an alcohol bottle which had quietly been removed from sight a month before on account of a leak. His joy at

the discovery of his old acquaintance was most demonstrative and noisy in expression, and for the day this toy was left in his possession till a surer hiding-place could be gotten.

His baby sister arrived when he was *39 months* old. To reward him for his imprisonment away from his mother, his father took a most professional-looking bottle from the laboratory to him and said little sister had brought it. He was hugely delighted, and when told he might see her, he came running into the room with one of his biggest bottles to present to her. His expression upon seeing her total indifference to him and his bottle was one of great disappointment. A month later, when daily a witness of her helplessness, he still clung to the idea that she had brought him a bottle, and not till six months after did the incongruity dawn upon him, and he then asked me how such a little thing brought such a big bottle.

An ink bottle Santa Claus tucked into his stocking, shortly after, (*40 months*) was drawn out with supreme satisfaction as he felt its shape, and was the most appreciated of his gifts. For days preceding Xmas he had shouted up the chimney-place for it.

About this time a new stage of interest developed. The *name* of the contents, especially if long and to be seen on a label, had a charm. As a rule, the contents were water, frequently poured in by himself, but that did not in the least alter his feeling as to their dangerous qualities if he had once been told the bottle held "dangerous stuff." He placed his bottles in rows, and poured from one to the other, making mixtures as he had occasionally seen the druggist do. He frequently renamed the same bottle different things. When the mixtures were made he "unmade" them by pouring back the various fluids.

Strings were led from one bottle to another two months later, (*42 months*) in imitation of the mechanism of our Pasteur filter. When angry at his nurse he would put away all his bottles, depriving himself of them as I have sometimes done to him for punishment. He, however, did it with the feeling that he was doing her an injury. I found out his notion was that if she scolded him, she might scold his bottles, and he put them away not to give her that pleasure. From three and a half years on for the next six months he was out of town, where the attractions of active

farm life kept him out of doors until a severe illness came. Then a long convalescence was beguiled with novel kindergarten toys. After his return, his play-hours were frequently passed with a little companion, who, though a highly imaginative child, was not easily persuaded into adopting bottles into the play, unless as poison vessels for killing their "ogre giants." So bottles were to a certain extent discarded, though there could always be found one or two treasured among his toys where he could occasionally handle them. This year, as his special comrade moved to another part of the city, he has been thrown more on his own resources, and the bottle interest revived with the first autumnal days that housed him. Every empty bottle was eagerly asked for. I found a little one in his coat pocket when travelling that he had quietly secured for himself as a comforter on the cars. A tiny bottle I recently gave his sister was plaintively begged for on the ground that she was "so careless and would break it," and he did "so long to have it." It was rescued for him, and he hid it in his "secret trouser pocket."

The other day he was standing by the window soliloquizing as he turned a bottle upside down, and watched the imprisoned bubbles move: "It depends on the changes of the world how the bubble changes. If the world did not go up and down, the bubble would not go up and down. It is now a good world-teller." His father had used a spirit-level in his presence a few days before, and he was putting his own interpretation on the experiment.

The history of this bottle-passion has its value as a contribution toward the study of the mental development of childhood. There is no doubt whatever that the passion was inborn, for, although no measures were taken to repress its manifestations, there was nothing in the surroundings of the child that would plant the seeds of such an interest. As a professional physicist, the father was daily in a laboratory where more or less glassware was to be seen, but the distance there was so great from the child's home that he seldom entered it, and made his first visit long after the passion had become a recognized fact. That the father also passed through a similar stage of intense interest in bottles would seem to make the interest hereditary for at least one generation ;

beyond that, accurate data as to childish pastimes has not been kept.

The impression left in the father's mind tallies with the conviction forced upon mine as to the boy's interest in bottles—that it was aroused by a sense of wonder and fascination in the contents and their danger. While still in his teens the father was diverted from his absorbing interest in chemistry to study physics, impelled by the feeling that even more of mystery and awe were associated with the investigation of its laws. Tracing back the ancestry on the father's side, as the child's inherited passion undoubtedly came through that branch of the family, the chief characteristic has been the number of Lutheran clergymen in the grandmother's line of descent. Music and a decided mechanical inventiveness have marked the grandfather's ancestors. It is possible the deep and reverent awe with which the old German clergy studied the mysteries of the supernatural may have left its trace upon this generation, and crossed with the mechanical instincts of the other side, have resulted in this curious blending.

While the contest wages hot between the followers of Darwin and Lamarck, as to the possibility of inheriting acquired characteristics, it would be venturesome to assert that this strange love for the mysterious, epitomized in bottles, is a possible expression of an acquired mental mood. As has been indicated, the child is of German-American parentage, physically well developed, of a nervous and imaginative disposition, revelling in tales of the supernatural, and with a marked preference for such as can be at the same time thought of as true.



