

The line that separates childhood from adulthood is very fine. Or, at least, people's perceptions of these periods of life can be rather indistinct. And, if we are honest about our own behavior, we probably pass back and forth across that line many times during our lives. And, in fact, we can act both childishly and as mature adults in the same day, perhaps even the same hour. Then, too, there are those individuals who never seem to "grow up," and others who were "born old."

I suppose, too, it depends on our particular vantage point. We have all noticed with amusement a small child looking up with hero worship in her or his eyes at a teenager--the same person whose parents and other adults may sometimes view with despair, wondering if the teen will ever grow up.

It was sometime during my college years--I suppose I would have fallen into the "young adult" category at the time--that I received my comeuppance at the hands of a small boy. I was home for the summer, as usual, helping on the farm. I was doing some task or another which required my driving the Ford tractor in the barnyard. A neighbor--an old beekeeper--was there talking to my mother. He had his grandson with him. The little fellow, who was perhaps five years old at the time, happened to be related to me, too, on the beekeeper's daughter-in-law's side of the family, and I was somewhat acquainted with him. He watched me as I drove the tractor, and I noticed that he had a rather disgusted look on his face. When I stopped the motor to talk to him, he spoke first.

"Kids shouldn't drive tractors," he said. "It's too dangerous."

I was quite impressed that someone had already made him aware of the perils inherent in operating farm machinery.

"That's right," I answered. "Only grownups should drive tractors."

"So," he said, his small face puckered in disapproval, "why are you doing it?"

Several years later, I had another experience that, some involved persons later told me, was quite graphic evidence that age does not necessarily imply consistently mature behavior.

On one of our trips to Sweden we had brought back a coffee set for

my mother. There were six demitasse coffee cups with saucers and six small china plates that matched, suitable for dessert or a sandwich. Now and then, if we had too many guests for a similar set of our own, I would borrow some place settings from my mother in order to have enough.

I had done this on some occasion or another, and after our company had left, I'd washed the dishes and stacked them up to return to her. The sensible adult move would have been next to place the china in a box before carrying it across the field and through the barnyard--my route to her house.

This, of course, was too much trouble. I stacked cups and saucers on the small plates, took them in both hands, and started out. Even with this poor judgment, I would have come out okay if my "adulthood" had reasserted itself at this point. But, of course, it did not.

On the way to my mother's home, I decided to stop in the barn and take a look at the litter of new kittens that had just emerged from hiding. I had not seen them yet, but I knew where they were. I went into the barn, carrying the china, and approached the pen when the mother cat had settled in with her new family. There was a straw bed in the corner, but the rest of the floor was clean, bare cement. You can guess the rest. In my impatience to pick up the kittens, my hand slipped, and I dropped one stack of the dishes on the concrete. Several cups and a couple of saucers were broken.

No one I know could think of any way to explain this incident other than the "return to childhood" theory. On our next trip to Sweden, though, we bought a new set of dishes for my mother. Still, I don't forget that day, and it sometimes serves to keep me from crossing over into that unfettered life of childhood, where the prospect of breaking a set of china is not daunting enough to cause any loss of sleep.