


1900

Literature for Children

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LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN.

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Gertrude Sarah Fison.

1900.

Literature for Children.

In this advanced age of public education, with such well-equipped schools and colleges, when one can find a public library in almost every community, when the subject of child study and development is one of the leading topics in education, the demand for proper reading matter for children has become a vital question. This has perhaps naturally resulted from the large quantities of juvenile reading being forced upon the public every year, a very small proportion of which has any literary or instructive quality to recommend it and the larger part of which is certainly harmful.

The mature person can easily discriminate, selecting that which is good, which instructs, or elevates and casting aside the chaff to burn in an unquenchable fire. With the children it is different. As they are unable to select for themselves, we must do it for them, and it must be done with even greater care and forethought than we should use in ^{the} selection ^{of} our own reading.

In the days of our forefathers it was different. The conditions surrounding the home life were simpler and the development of the child was attended with fewer complications than now. The quantity and quality of children's books were so

meager. With the changes in the child's environment to-day, the question which naturally presents itself to us is, Are we to leave the child surrounded by this great mass of material which is thrown into the world every year, to starve in the midst of plenty, or shall we with careful hands sort out that which is pure and wholesome and feed with care a developing mind.

In Colonial times the child occupied a sad and gloomy position. The parents were extremely strict, and in England they were even stricter, though that seems an impossibility. He was expected to be perfectly obedient and to perform his duties with punctuality and precision. The old proverb that "Little Children should be seen and not heard" was instilled into his mind. Children were taught reading, writing and arithmetic. After receiving instruction in these three branches a pupil was considered to be "well educated," quite different from the present time, when the various sciences are being introduced to interest the child in his school life.

Reading was taught at first from the Hornbook, which was made of a thin piece of wood usually four or five inches long and two inches wide; on this was placed a sheet of paper a little smaller. At the top was printed the alphabet in both

large and small letters; below this were some simple syllables such as, ab, eb, ib, ob,; then followed the Lord's Prayer. This paper was covered by a thin sheet of yellowish horn which was nearly transparent, so that the words were easily read through it; the whole was fastened to the board by a narrow strip of metal which bound the edges.

The Hornbook was followed by the Primer, which until after the Reformation in England, was for private devotion, and contained the services of the hours, Lord's Prayer, Ten Commandments, and Psalms. But the real successor of the Hornbook was known as the New England Primer, fitly called the "Little Bible of New England." This comprised of the alphabet, short syllables such as are found in the Hornbook, followed by words of longer syllables, the Lord's Prayer and the "Shorter Catechism," so named to distinguish it from the Catechism in England, called "The Careful Father and Pious Child," which consisted of twelve hundred questions and answers, while the "Shorter Catechism" had only one hundred and seven questions with some very long answers.

These books together with the Bible were all that the little ones had to read; and not until 1660, do we hear of any books written expressly for children. And then the titles

were so mournful that the boys and girls of to-day would surely be frightened frightened at hearing them. At that time James Janeway published two books, one of which was entitled "A Token for Children, being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children." There was also "The Looking Glass for Children" in which one little girl says,-

"When by Spectors I behold
What Beauty doth adorn me
Or in a glass when, I behold
How sweetly God did form me,
Hath God such com^eliness bestowed
And on me made to dwell
What pity such a pretty maid
As I, should go to Hell!"

There is little wonder that the children of that time were always talking about their sinful nature and possibility of going to Hell. Think of children in our own day reading the "Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes drawn from the Breast of the Old and New Testament;" by John Cotton, and "The Day of Doom; or a Poetical description of the great and Last Judgement" by Michael Wigglesworth. Is it surprising that Betty Sewall, an

innocent child of nine, "burst into an amazing cry" after reading such books as these, and said "she was afraid she should goe to Hell, her sins were not pardoned?" It is heartrending to read Judge Sewall's entry in his diary at this date. He says "Betty can hardly read her chapter for weeping. Tells she is afraid she is gone back. Does not taste that sweetness in reading the Word which once she did." Poor Betty! perhaps one thing which added more to her discouragement is that in the same entry Judge Sewall writes concerning two of her little friends; one of whom, Phoebe Bartlett, was converted at the age of four; and the other, Jane Turell, "asked many astonishing questions about divine mysteries" before she was five. Another child, an infant, before she was twelve months old would lie in her cot with hands clasped listening to the precious words; though she could say but little, she would cry "No! No!" and look wistfully at the Bible on the shelf if her parents sat down to breakfast without either prayer or reading. Such were the prodigies of those days.

In 1678 Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress was published in England, and three years later it appeared in America. Though not exactly a book for children it, together with Robinson Crusoe published in 1714 and Gulliver's Travels which appeared

in 1726, has been calmly appropriated by them; and one may doubt if there are any books which have been more widely read than these.

Although a few children's books were written in the seventeenth century, it was not until 1744 that there was any real interest taken in this form of literature. It was then that John Newbery, an English publisher, who settled in London, issued a series of books, the first of which was called "A Pretty Little Pocket Book." This contained a number of short stories and quaint cuts; among them, "Jack-the-Giant Killer," which has come down to our own day. These books were published in cheap editions, commonly called "Chap-Books," and sold for about a penny a piece. Newbery wrote the greater number of them. The rest were by various authors of that period.

It was about this time that "Little Red Riding Hood" came out, edited by Perrault, also Dr. Isaac Watt's famous book of "Divine Songs" for young people; and "Goody Two-Shoes," supposed to have been written by Oliver Goldsmith, soon followed. The latter was an interesting account of a little girl by that name who had only one shoe, which was badly worn out; and when one fine day she had a present of a new pair, she immediately started out, telling everybody of her good fortune.

The story is quaint and prettily told. Following these were the "Leila Books," and the "Fairchild Family," by Mrs. Sherwood.

Although the books had begun to be somewhat more worldly in tone, they were still mostly religious. Nearly all were similar to "Seven Little Boys in Heaven and How they got there," each chapter of which deals with the adventures of these seven good little boys and how they finally found the sought-for place. All died not older than ten years. In the "Fairchild Family" Lucy is constantly reproving her mother and father for wickedness and compelling her brother to recite long passages from the Bible as a punishment for some mischievous act.

There is one book which deserves special mention, for two reasons: first, because it has been a more formidable rival of "Robinson Crusoe" than any other book published in the eighteenth century; and secondly, though not a model yet it has been a source of great inspiration to other writers. This work is Mr. Day's "Sandford and Merton," published between 1783 and 1789. Sandford is the son of a poor man and is good, courageous, industrious and unpretentious; while Merton is the son of a rich man and is mean, cowardly, lazy and possessed of an exaggerated idea of his own importance. The real aim of the author was to express his ideas on the system of fashionable

education at that time. The book is interesting to the historian as well as the child.

It is this "Sandford and Merton" which is supposed to have influenced Maria Edgeworth. All her characters are strongly contrasted; her "Little Dog Trusty" deals with a liar and a boy of truth; "The Orange Man" with the honest boy and the thief; "The Cherry Orchard", with doings of good-natured Marianne and her ill-tempered cousin Owen. There is one thing, however, which this sharp contrast has brought about, and that is reform in conduct; for what child could possibly read such strongly didactic tales without feeling their influence. Charlotte M. Yonge says, that the books which she enjoyed the most were Miss Edgeworth's "Jemima Placid," "Perambulations of a Mouse" and "Village School."

With the nineteenth century children's books of a different order began to appear, as some titles would indicate;

Garden talks with Children, Rambles among the woods, together with "Boy's and Girl's Library," a series of works treating of the Natural Sciences, Travel, Religion and History, in the form of family talks written by Uncle Philip. Then there similar ones on miracles of the seasons, the marvels of reproduction, the movement of sun, moon and stars, and the thought

of God as Maker and Disposer, which greatly enlarged the field of the child's thought and imagination.

One of England's best story-tellers for children is Miss Molesworth, who wrote the "Adventures of Herr Baby," "Two Little Waifs," "A Christmas Child" and a host of others, all suitable for youthful reading. Miss Molesworth's great charm lay in her common-sense talks expressed in a good straightforward way with no lurking sentimentality. Her simplicity of style and her sympathy for children are unbounded.

Other English writers are A. L. O. E.- A Lady of England- who is Charlotte Tucker; and Charles L. Dodgson, better known by his pseudonym, Lewis Carroll, who wrote "Alice Adventures in Wonderland," "Through the Looking-Glass" and "The Hunting of the Snark." The first two probably did more to make him famous than either his preaching or mathematical lectures, during his connection with Christ Church, Oxford.

One writer has said that "a more capable pen than Dr. George MacDonald has never catered to children." Many wholesome lessons are to be learned from his works. Dr. MacDonald's books are essentially books for all, young and old, who love conscientious workmanship, and changing if not stirring situations. With Dr. MacDonald, Louisa M. Alcott might be properly classed.

Miss Alcott's works have the true ring to them; they are simply told and very realistic. If the reader be a girl, she will invariably imagine herself to be either Jo, or Beth, or Polly, whichever character appeals to her most.

Then there are Susan Coolidge, Helen Hunt Jackson, Lucy C. Lillie and Kate Douglas Wiggin for girls and Marryat, Robert Louis Stevenson, Trowbridge, Thomas Knox, Kirk Munroe, Francis Hodgson Burnett, Henty, and Kipling for boys, together with Andrew Lang and his numerous fairy tales. In addition to these authors, might be named a host of others all of whom have written books full of healthy activity that it does one good to read about. Who, for instance, can lose himself in "Tom Brown" without being better for it? Even the Old Boys feel a thrill of pleasure as they re-read the account of Tom's educational experiences and recall old school days. And "Little Lord Fentleroy" has already won for itself a place among juvenile classics.

That books have great influence upon children can be readily seen in the previously related incidents; and it is evident that the greatest care should be exercised in selecting their reading. The importance of this is universally recognized. Teachers are given special training in child study in the

Normal Schools. Librarians are fitting up special rooms for the children, with a skillful person in charge to direct the minds of the little ones; and to-day this department of the public library is recognized as the most important of all.

In selecting books one writer says:- "All that answers to the fascination of the horrible, whether the forms be ghosts, crimes, tortures, punishments, blood-curdling scenes or hair-breadth escapes; all that invites gloomy thoughts or introspection; all books that deal with subjects which have no proper place in the child life, however commendable otherwise; all that deals with subtilities, cunning, intrigue. Social or domestic problems; all that exploit violent emotions - all extremes whatsoever should be avoided."

Would this writer consider as an "extreme" "The Babes in the Woods," over whose sad fate so many childish tears have been shed ?

Selecting books will ever be a perplexing question. Care and tact must be exercised. The feeling - "Oh, he's only a boy give him anything"- has been found to be very harmful. Many have acquired a decided dislike for reading, because they have been victims of this spirit.

It is here that the teachers have a rare opportunity.

No one knows the temperament of the child better. His peculiarities, imaginations, likes and dislikes are being constantly displayed in the schoolroom. In many cases she knows the child better than its parents, and is, therefore, the one person who can help him in his reading, by suggesting those books which she knows will suit him. The library is the key to the situation, and with the co-operation of the librarian a great deal can be accomplished. With his help lists can be prepared and the scholar's tastes and inclinations discovered. In short each case can be diagnosed and the proper remedy applied; and eventually the child will become an enthusiastic reader, enjoying those books which are helpful and instructive and an aid to him in his school work. One of the Commissioners of education in Massachusetts has said, that the child of the city school is invariably more advanced than the one of the same age from the country, because he has read more and what he has read has been supplementary to his school work.

The librarian does embrace the opportunity offered him; and in the short time he has to talk with the juvenile patrons, finds out many interesting things about them, their tastes and ambitions, favorite authors and studies. But all this must be done with care and in an honest way; the librarian must show

a genuine interest or they will be quick to see that there is a motive behind it all and become very reticent, especially so, if a boy is an admirer of the wildly sensational. The question has arisen. How may these boys be led to read better books? This can be done only by the education of taste. Books of travel or adventure, like Marryat's and Henty's have often made the boy forget his cheap novel and led him unconsciously to the story of the "Odyssey" and the "Iliad," while the exploits of Alexander the Great, Caesar, or Napoleon have never failed to excite an interest. In this way he is led to better things; a desire is soon awakened for travel, history and biography; and the vicious book becomes distasteful.

But with the teacher and librarian must co-operate the home. Its influence is most important, if the best results are to be obtained. It has been well said, "No greater good fortune can befall a child than to be born into a home where the best books are read, the best music interpreted, and the best talk enjoyed; for in these privileges the richest educational opportunities are supplied."

No matter if the reading be limited. Teach the children to acquire wholesome habits of reading and to use books.

They will thus not only become familiar with the best that has been thought and said, but will themselves learn to think and to express their thoughts. Then their acquaintance with books will become a source of definite gain.

Gertrude Sarah Fison.