

READING IN THE NURSERY.

BY V. M. HOOD.

“He who plays his music to the stars,
Is standing at your window with his flute.”

Tagore.

THESE words from Tagore's book, "The Crescent Moon," bring back to us many delightful visions. Golden hours of youth float into our memories from far distant childhood, hours of romance from the age of fairies, hours of thoughts pure and innocent; winged thoughts that have taken flight, and have flown we know not whither.

Some of these remembered thoughts interpret for us (the mothers of to-day) many little actions in our own nurseries, which otherwise we would not understand. One of the most persistent thoughts is the remembrance of how a beautiful scene, or picture, seen in early childhood, still lingers in our minds. It is impossible to over estimate the influence everything beautiful has on the unfolding flower of a child's mind. Therefore it is our duty, as mothers of the coming race, to see that, as far as lies within our power, the minds of our children awaken and develop amid surroundings that will leave upon them an indelible love of Beauty in all its various forms.

The Greek mothers of old, during the months before their little ones were born, were said to gaze daily upon some beautiful work of art, and we know that the Greeks of those early days reached a very high type of beauty, both in body and mind. It would be well if the mothers of to-day pondered over this thought and wove it round all their plans for the care and education of their children.

Again we are told that the Jesuits believe impressions made in the early years of a child's life can never be effaced, and that

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for good or evil, these impressions are woven into the plastic material of the growing brain.

The little flannel or cotton books that are given to baby should be the best you can buy. All small children love brightly coloured pictures, but try to see that those you give your baby are of good design and pure colour. Many a grown man and woman has suffered cruel disillusionment in later life from finding a book, beloved in early days, to have been an idol with clay feet. As soon as a babe is sufficiently developed to notice and to hold objects, begin to show him a book, preferably of pictures of animals. Point out to him each animal in turn, telling him its name, and making the sound appropriate to the animal. The child will soon imitate you, and although this seems a small matter, yet it is the first turn of the key that opens the gate of wonderland.

In nursery reading, the Bible comes before all other books. As soon as the children are old enough to understand, begin to tell them simply some of the Bible stories. Tell the stories as nearly as possible in the Bible language, and as soon as they can understand, read to them directly from the Bible itself. Little children are deeply interested in the story of the Creation, of Noah, of the finding of the little baby Moses, and the stories of the childhood of Christ appeal especially to their minds. As they grow older more stories can be added, because the stories of the Bible in their simple beauty, appeal to the soul of the child, and that child soul reaches out

to the High Truths that shine through the Bible tales in a way which, to some of us, appears little short of miraculous. We have to remind ourselves constantly of our Lord's words, that it is only the child mind that can enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is curious how very early in life children develop a sense of what is simple and true in literature. I know a child who, at the age of five, had a book called "Froggy's Little Brother" read to her, and who still remembers the uncomfortable feeling which this story awoke in her mind. This child was too young to know what false sentiment meant, but her mind instinctively rejected the unwholesome fare. There are one or two books which, without this failing, are nevertheless quite unsuitable to read to small children. A book about a child is not necessarily adapted to a child's mind, although it may be very much appreciated by older people. I refer especially to a charming book of Mrs. Ewing's called "Jackanapes," and also to a book of [p 528]

Florence Montgomery's entitled "Misunderstood." It seems to me that both these books are written from the grown up's idea of a child, and, therefore, are enjoyed by older people, but that from the child's point of view, they are too sad. They leave behind them an uncomfortable feeling because they are not really portraying the unconscious, natural life of a child. Mrs. Ewing's "Dandelion Clocks" and "Lob lie by the fire" are quite different, and I think every child would enjoy them and ought to know them.

Winter is the time when most stories are read to the little people, as Robert Louis Stevenson says:—

"Summer fading, winter comes—
Frosty mornings, tingling thumbs,
Window robins, winter rooks,
And the picture story books."

And again in another poem—he describes when the lamp is lit—how he plays happily till Nurse comes and he has to return across the sea:—

"And go to bed with backward looks
At my dear land of story books."

Of all the stories of childhood, none are more loved than fairy tales—the old fairy stories that have come down from one generation to another. It is a sad house where the children do not believe in fairies, and a whole world of delight is lost if the little people do not know of, or care for, fairies and fairy stories. Children never tire of "Red Riding Hood," of "Golden Locks," of "Grimm's Fairy Tales," and in a lesser degree, of Hans Andersen! Many of the Folk Stories too are a great joy. ... Some of Andrew Lang's Fairy Books are also much appreciated.

A book of "More Russian Tales," by Maud Valery Carrick, is a favourite with small children, and is charmingly illustrated. There is another book of fairy stories called "The Glass Mender," by Maurice Baring, which children of five years old and upwards like, and it is very prettily illustrated.

There is only one fairy tale of to-day that is loved as the old fairy tales are, and that is Barrie's "Peter Pan,"—Peter Pan with his delightful whimsical personality, elfish and yet a child,

wild and yet gentle. His fairy friend Tinkabell [sic] is part of the life of every nursery in our land. "Tink" appears with the

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sunshine, and dances all over the nursery in her rainbow-coloured dress, and she is always hailed with shouts of joy. Barrie is one of the few men who has kept the heart of a child, and can still see deep into that mysterious region many of us have left so far behind.

Among some of the most charming of our illustrated children's books are those of Kate Greenaway, Walter Crane and Caldecott. Kate Greenaway's delightful pictures of little people, which illustrates her rhymes, are inimitable. "Marigold," "A Day in a Child's Life," and the others, are books every child should possess. Caldecott's books too are possessions, and can now be had in quite small volumes of a size little people like to hold because they are tiny. Walter Crane has illustrated many children's books, such as "The Three Bears," "The Baby's Bouquet," and "The Floral Fantasy," to name a few. In the "Floral Fantasy" each page shows a different flower deftly drawn in human form, and the wealth of fanciful imagination it displays must affect the minds of the children who look at it.

The whole series of Beatrix Potter's books too are a great pleasure to the present generation of little people. The stories about "Peter Rabbit," "Squirrel Nutkin," and "The Pie and the Pattypan," besides many other celebrities of the woods, are told in a charmingly simple way, and are admirably illustrated. Two little books one often comes across—"Little Black Mingo" and "Little Black Sambo" are most attractive. These books were, I think, written and illustrated by an Anglo-Indian lady for her children, and the pictures, though rather primitive, are excellent in their way. There is a large book called "Fairyland," which is rather difficult to get now-a-days, except in second hand catalogues. It is illustrated by Dicky Doyle, and the fairy scenes are full of the grace and witchery which children love, and which only Doyle and Sir Noel Paton seem to have had the power to paint in their fairy pictures.

Another charming series of books is illustrated by H. Willebeck le Mair. These are books of songs and nursery rhymes, the latter are published in the small volumes that are so well adapted to children's use.

In all these books, I dwell more on the illustrations than on the text. I feel very strongly that in the nursery, it is through illustrations that children get to know and love the stories. That is the reason that mothers cannot be too careful in choos-

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ing books with really fine illustrations. There are many of the older nursery books, which never can be replaced by modern stories, such as the "Parent's Assistant," by Maria Edgeworth, and "The Fairchild Family," by Mrs. Sherwood. This latter book has been edited lately by Lady Strachey, and made more suitable for the modern child. These stories with morals still appeal to children, and the simple lessons of truth and goodness taught by them are wholesome fare for young minds.

There is a book which is most suitable for Sunday reading called "The Golden Windows," by Laura E. Richards. The stories are a series of simple parables, which children like even when they only half understand their meaning. There is one of these stories my children love so much, that I will tell it shortly. It is called

"A MATTER OF IMPORTANCE."

It happened one day that the angel-who-attends-to-things was hurrying along the street, with his wings tucked in and his robes tucked up. He paused by the Palace of a Duke. The Duke looked out and called to him to stop, as he wished to consult the angel about a matter of importance. "I am in a hurry this morning," said the angel, "and cannot attend to your affairs," and he passed on. "Dear me," said the Duke, "I must go and see where he is going," and he rose and followed the angel. Presently the angel passed by a Bishop's Palace. The Bishop looked out and called to the angel: "Stop a minute, please; I wish to consult you about the Meeting of the Synod." "I am sorry," said the angel, "but I am on business of importance this morning, and cannot attend to your little affairs," and he hurried on. "Dear me," said the Bishop, "what can it be that is so important. I must really go and see," and he rose and followed the Duke and the angel. Then the angel passed by the King's Palace, and the King called to him: "Please come in here and give me your advice, for the enemy is invading my kingdom." "By and by," said the angel, "I am on business of importance to-day and cannot stop for trifles." The King looked after him. "It must indeed be something of world-wide importance," he said, "if the invasion of my kingdom is a little matter beside it," and he, too, rose and followed the angel, the Duke and the Bishop. At last the angel came to a poor court in a large town. In the centre of the court some clothes were drying, and there stood a little

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child crying as if his heart would break. The angel ran to the child and threw his arms around him. He kissed the child's tears away saying, "It is all right, dear, you only took a wrong turning. Here she is," and he turned and gave the child into the arms of a woman who came running round the corner. The child and the mother seemed to melt together in their joy, and the angel turned to where the Duke, the Bishop and the King stood gazing at the scene with round-eyed astonishment. "And now," said the angel, "I can attend to your little matters."

Stories like this cannot be read too often to a child. We may never see the result, but the little seed will take root and grow one day into a great tree—a tree that may be for the healing of the nations. He who realises that in children lies the future of the race, can never build too high, though he knows many generations will pass before the builders are even in sight of the coping stone.

There are several books about animals which are not only interesting, but have a great influence on a child's attitude towards animals. Many children are naturally kind and gentle to animals, but often, from want of thought, children do not realise how quite dependant their little friends the dog and cat are, nor yet how delightful it is to make the acquaintance of our little brown brothers, the sparrows.

There is quite an old book called "Black Beauty," by Sewell, which ought to be in every nursery. It is the story of the life of an horse, told with wonderful perception, and cannot fail to touch the heart of any child, and to make it think kindly and considerately of this dumb friend of man. "The Story of a little Red Deer," a tale of the Devonshire moors, is full, too, of the love of nature, and of all the wonders of nature's life.

Some of Ernest Seton Thompson's books are too old for the little nursery reader, but "The Biography of a Grizzly" is simple, and will be enjoyed by most little folk of five years old and upwards.

There are so many books for children that it is difficult to pick and choose, but one or

two of the older books like "Stumps," "Little Lord Fauntleroy," and "Sara Crewe," are too good not to possess. Then there is that lovely tale by Frances Crompton called "The Gentle Heritage," full of beautiful, helpful thoughts, woven so deftly into the story that the child absorbs them quite unconsciously. "The Secret Garden," by Frances Hodgson Burnett, the author of "Little Lord

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Fauntleroy" and "Sara Crewe," is also a book that should be on the nursery bookshelf.

No nursery is complete without Robert Louis Stevenson's "A Child's Garden of Verses." No poet has ever written for children quite as he did, perhaps because no poet has understood, or shall I say remembered, his childhood as Robert Louis Stevenson did. There is, however, another poet of to-day, who has written a book of verse for children, that some critics consider almost equal to the poems of Robert Louis Stevenson. His name is Walter de la Mare, and his book is called "Peacock Pie." I would like to quote one charming little poem from it, which I think does not fall far short of Robert Louis Stevenson at his best. It is called "The Window."

 "Behind the blinds I sit and watch
 The people passing—passing by;
And not a single one can see
 My tiny watching eye.

They cannot see my little room
 All yellowed with the shaded sun;
They do not even know I'm here;
 Nor'll guess when I am gone."

Many of Stevenson's poems are set to music, and although songs, I think, cannot strictly be said to come under the heading of reading in the nursery, I should like to suggest that good music, like good art, should find its way into every nursery. Little children should be taught to sing the old nursery rhymes, and many of the Folk Songs of England, Scotland and Ireland. These songs appeal to little people, and poetry reaches their souls through music, just as the meaning of what they read reaches their minds through the medium of pictures.

The best music, the best art, should be used to help children to come to the realisation of what is best in literature.

Literature, art, music, all three can begin to be learned in the nursery. All three are a great possession, a possession for life. When the clouds of life drift about your children, these three will lead them through the mists to the mountain tops, and there they will find that the sun they had thought obscured is always shining in the Eternal Heavens.