

## DIETARY LAWS OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS

BY MONTROSE J. MOSES

HAVE you ever seen a child with book indigestion, with a mental rash due to the reading of oversaccharine stories, with a coated tongue caused by a degradation of taste? Such ailments are found every day among boys and girls. Yet we are blind to these insidious diseases. There is no reason why laws should protect the food one eats, and fail to protect the books one reads. The chemical action on the brain of a bad book is just as harmful as the disintegrating force of an ill-smelling cut of beef in the stomach. The only difference is that in the latter case we are quick to note the danger; while in the former case we are not clever enough to measure the harm. Nature, strange to say, has not protected the brain with any apparent guardian at its portals; whereas, there are an infinite number of fortresses at the entrance of the stomach. There is no mental nose to cry "Halt".

Here, then, is a new subject for the immediate consideration of quantitative and qualitative chemists. Did they ever consider that a book was possessed of calories and proteins to as pronounced a degree as food products; that there are bacteria multiplying as rapidly in innocuous or insurgent literature as in a stagnant swamp; that, in many stories for the young, the waste material predominates so enormously as to enervate the

nervous system? The brain gets worn out by such dead weight. What a parent reads naturally affects the first literary reaching-out of a very young child, just as much as what a mother eats affects the mother's milk. More and more, there is a crying need for an Institute of Bookteriology, where a parent may go and see the test-tubes of literature, find a record of the temperatures of adventure stories, and other important things pertaining to reading of children.

I can imagine no better opportunity than to be able to say to a Book Chemist: "Let me see tube 10,578, containing the essence of 'Percy's Reliques'. My boy's imagination is not gaining strength; his blood is not warmed to the pitch which makes his courage equal to the emergencies of life. The doctor has prescribed an undiluted dose of 'Chevy Chase', of 'The Jew's Daughter', of 'Robin Hood'. Please tell me what are the ingredients of this ballad dose?" Then you would be handed a card on which would be tabulated the percentages of solid matter, of spiritual reactions. In this way you could see for yourself the kind of books which are energy producers, muscle formers, and you would then go to a bookstore with more confidence, with an assured feeling that the Pure Book Law was on the road to being an established fact.

What a hub-bub there is in a family

when the Grade A milk, or the whole-wheat bread, or the dressed beef is not up to standard. The papers hear about it, and there is a congressional investigation! But how about the bichloride of mercury stories swallowed by the child without causing any consternation; how about the adulterated sweet romances the girl gorges herself with! You really don't care about these! But, let me assure you, the proper blend of a juvenile story is of as vital importance as the proper blend of adult tea. The science of Bookteriology is an urgent necessity.

Let us forestall a systematic dietary study of books by a few notes made in the vital realm of the nursery. It is just as well to follow closely the tried science of food analysis. There is very little difference in philosophy between the two. What the child eats affects his physical development; what the child reads either enlarges or stunts his mental development. So there you are.

It is essential that parents familiarize themselves with a knowledge of what is the proper brain nutrition for children of different ages. They must understand the fuel values of books, their building-up power, and the amount of energy they infuse in character. Note, therefore, the following:

The fuel value of a book depends upon the amount of actual nutrients in the stories. Without too much experiment, but a great deal of observation, it is possible to see: a. That the warmth of the Bible unadulterated, is greater than any of its retold forms. b. That Shakespeare himself is more easily understood than the over-detailed prosing of Shakespeare, unless it be Charles Lamb, whose love for the plays made him desire to inculcate the same love in children. c. That the ballads, with their spirited swing, are more energizing than their bare story robbed of their rhyme, rhythm, and reason.

If you wish to test this out yourself, you only have to place a good copy of collected Ballads, one or two of Shake-

speare's chronicle plays (not school editions), and some of the militant books of the Bible in a room with a boy or girl, and, granting a healthy atmosphere, interest will incubate quickly. People often say that "Pilgrim's Progress" is food caviare to the young. This is merely because the appetite has been sated and the imagination dulled by more filling but less efficacious food. Which brings us to an important fact:

It must be thoroughly understood that appetite satisfied by quantity is not the same as appetite appeased by quality. The latter is the healthy condition. Seven of Altscheler's books, read in succession—"The Young Trailers", "The Texan Scouts", "The Riflemen of the Ohio", "The Free Rangers", and so on, are surpassed by feasting on one book like Noah Brooks's "The Boy Emigrants" or "The Boy Settlers". Have any set of "Desert Isle" stories ever surpassed the red vitality of "Robinson Crusoe" or "The Swiss Family Robinson"? Has the raciness of Fenimore Cooper been overshadowed by any of the Indian tales of Kirk Munroe or of W. O. Stoddard? We know that there are different degrees of excellence in the cuts of meat, the older slices, like "The Last of the Mohicans" or "The Deerslayer", being not quite as succulent to modern taste as Stoddard's "The Red Mustang", "The Talking Leaves", "Two Arrows"; but in the long run Cooper "keeps" better (to use a refrigerating term).

This matter of energy in books is a most important consideration. The children's classics persist from generation to generation because of their *carrying* power. But the average modern book for boys and girls moves only when it is commercially pushed. It is worth while observing that:

The energy given off by the Puritan mind, after training in the "New England Primer", could be counted upon in the formation of action for good; but the lukewarm morality of the present juvenile book does not create sufficient friction in the mind to give young readers any comprehensive understanding of conduct as good or bad. The end justifies the means more often than is healthy.

In the young, the delicate tissues of imagination should not be allowed to become threadbare in spots, for fear of their being moth-worn through life.

They should be strengthened and made humanly pliable by the calories and proteins of real book foodstuffs. Which brings us to this almost self-evident principle:

The waste of juvenile mind materials can be prevented by determining the proportions of calories and proteins in such stories as "Rob Roy" and "Redgauntlet", for instance, by Walter Scott, as compared with the same ingredients in any one of Henty's historical stories. In the bookstores the latter is offered as "just as good", but don't you believe it!

The question of digesting a book is one that has not received sufficient consideration in the nursery. If a story is appetizing and wholesome, well-flavored with a style which is a part of its vigor, then there is a rapid flow of interest which will be the mental saliva for its immediate consumption. Such literary food is easily chewed, and is preferable to the emaculated editions put forth in packages of "just as easy". Malnutrition is caused by the latter. Stories that are boiled down are often boiled away; stories that are steeped in sensation, should be roasted by the critics before they get near the nursery. There are, therefore, different ways of preparing book food for girls and boys, according to their ages. It is apparent to any discriminating person that:

A baby does not need as many calories as a boy of twelve, either in food or in books. Hence, library lists for different ages. But even infants may suffer from malnutrition of the mind, eye, and ear. The old time mother's lullaby is better than the ragtime cradle song by Irving Berlin; "Mother Goose" better than "Foxy Grandpa" and "The Katzenjammer Kids"; the reticent coloring of Caldecott, Kate Greenaway, Boutet de Monvel better than the colored supplement of the newspaper. An infant read to, shown pictures, sung to, is storing up experience. We ask, Is syncopation psychologically as comforting as the old folk songs? And reading through books of jingles, we wonder what has become of the recipes for the verses our great-great-grandauthors use to write. For bottle literature commend me "Mother Goose"!

While we are on the subject of babies, it is just as well to remark

that habits of literary diet are early formed and easily formed. Hence, it is important that book feeding be early determined. Not many meals a day in the first stages, for throughout the infant years we believe it as necessary to get away from books as to get to them. We therefore recommend the reestablishment of the Children's Hour. This has been wrongly interpreted by the influx of Bed Time Stories. One might just as well have Ulysses and Armada Stories for the bath. Or perhaps the "Water Babies"! To put a child to sleep by reading to him means that you are feeding him when his literary digestive organs are at their lowest ebb. Grownup selfishness invented such sedatives for the mind. But the boy to whom Uncle Remus recounted the adventures of Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox was alert and on the lookout for adventure—he didn't wish to be soothed to rest; neither was Charles Perrault's son anxious to fall asleep just at the exciting point in the story of "Sleeping Beauty" or "Cinderella", when first told to him in the days of Louis XIV. It is a common dietary law that one should not be too stimulated before sleeping. But it is a pernicious literary custom to dilute stories for bedtime—the "pap" literature which our kindergartens heretofore encouraged, and which our mothers are now buying as so much literary "dope" for the young. Brain energy should be conserved. Which suggests the following:

To oxidize a book in the mind, there is required the full development and flow of appreciation. Otherwise, if a child feels forced to read a book, mental energy is wasted. It takes just as much physical exertion to read a poor book as to read a good one, without the stretching process which the best invites. Any test will show that the eye strain, attention and time given to the reading of the average college story by Pier or Barbour or Heyliger are equal to the energy used up in the reading of "Tom Brown at Rugby" and "Tom Brown at Oxford".

But there is no question as to which is the superior article. This same conservation is imminent in the classics. The taste for Plutarch has been dulled by the boneless retelling; the liquid fire of Homer has evaporated, and there are the dregs of an occasionally simplified "Iliad" and "Odyssey"; the green freshness of the Greek god legends has become the dried serenity of the school leaflet.

While it is true that fever heat in the brain has landed many a boy in the Children's Court, and while educational methods have advocated literary leeches to suck the savage blood from our racial legends and legendary history, still the cause for abnormal juvenile temperature must be laid at the right door; for the literary inheritance of the race must be protected. King Arthur has never yet made a thief; but, as told in versions "just as good" as the "Morte D'Arthur", he has never inspired the boy with chivalry. It takes the Boy Scout doctrine to make the modern knight. The unnatural caloric heat of the dime novel, of the kinetic moving-picture, has produced an unnatural tension on juvenile nerves. King Arthur in search of the Grail must compete with desperadoes robbing a stage coach. In other words, to the modern child, the force of action, of external suggestion, exceeds the force of character in his literature. What are all the winged beings of the air, Queen Mab threading her way with gossamer lightness, Lucifer in his Miltonic descent from heaven, beside the modern adventure of the aeroplane? In other words, our literature, as it is taught in the schools, creates the idea that there is no "pep" in ancient literature. The question is, therefore, how can we peptonize good books so they will be in favor again, and win out in this competition with the yearly democratic mass of juvenile stories? The safe road to follow is to delete from our schools the deadened study of the big books of the ages, and substitute

instead appreciation, as a fine, a necessary art. "Hamlet" or "Julius Cæsar", with notes, means the notes with "Hamlet" and "Julius Cæsar" left out; required class reading produces an unhealthy mental sweat from which the child will have dire after-effects.

A continued diet of one type of book is likely permanently to injure the taste. Too many weepy stories depletes the tear duct, and blinds the young reader to the real tragedies of life, such as one finds in "King Lear", and other essential book stuffs for a later culture. It is imperative to vary the appetite, to offset any special tendencies in juvenile readers by other healthy books. The boy who would build flying machines all day, must be made to fly an hour or two in imaginative literature; a girl who would learn how to sweep a room in a manual school of training must be also taught to sweep her brain of cobwebs. He who dwells too much in the realm of make-believe is likely to have an inflamed imagination. Anyone can tell without asking to see his tongue what was the matter with the boy who contemplated a primrose by the river's brim: he was suffering from imaginative adenoids—a growth which is liable to take root when the child is given his first picture-books, especially the kindergarten species of picture-book.

How often have you met with the statement, "The writer knows a boy who is made seriously ill by eating eggs"? Why, I know many boys whose digestions are irretrievably impaired by the mere shell of a story, without any food stuff in it: causing a literary flatulency which is liable to run its course through old age. Such books are themselves diseased and should be guarded against.

The bacteriology of children's books

is another branch of the subject demanding the utmost consideration. The "success" germ stimulates a false flow of youthful enthusiasm and emulation; the "snob" virus circulates freely through the plot of many school stories; the "social bee" stings the mind of many a girl reader, resulting in an exaggerated point of view. These germs are due to errors in writing; such book errors may produce mental gastric trouble.

From this discussion, it will be seen that, as soon as experiment is carried far enough, an exact science of Book-teriology will be the result. Even now, the specialist in the children's room of the public library can give parents many simple home remedies

for such juvenile book ailments as "abnormal taste", "adventurous fever", "sensitive nerves", "romantic measles", "practical restlessness", "the movie thirst", "brain anæmia", "ethical deterioration",—all caused by the parent's not attending to the elementary dietary laws. The best possible medicine-chest a mother can have for such infant troubles is a bookshelf in the nursery, with a carefully selected row of red-blooded, energy-making, sympathy-creating poems, stories and legends. Looking on the bookshelves in the nurseries of many homes, with their low degrees of calories and proteins, I feel like marking the diluted material found there, "Poison, poison, poison!"

## IN A CITY PARK

BY AMELIA JOSEPHINE BURR

WE laughed together in the sunset glow  
 On the cool slope. Across the grassy flat  
 We saw him coming toward us, in his hand  
 A bunch of late wild violets held tight.  
 Slowly and wearily he walked and fanned  
 His wistful sallow face with his straw hat.  
 He looked long at us—then upon a stone  
 At the hill's foot, he rested with his head  
 Bowed in the shelter of his hands, alone,  
 While the sky darkened and the moon shone white.  
 I wanted to go down to where he sat  
 And say to him—*Brother, I know; I know!*  
 I would have gone, had I not also known  
 That hidden face could not be comforted  
 Save by God's patient ministers, the years.  
 When he went away into the night  
 My heart went with him step for step; I knew  
 That from the same eternal spring, Life drew  
 Our laughter and his tears.