

THE BOOK TABLE

THIS PREDIGESTING BUSINESS

BY FRANCES DUNCAN

THE way to form in children a taste for good literature is to see to it that they have good literature to taste. "Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are," runs the slogan of a well-known health food. Shakespeare had the same idea of the value of diet, though he didn't make a slogan of it—"Upon what meat doth this our Cæsar feed, that he hath grown so great?"

Look back, sir, or madam, to your own childhood. What books made an impression on you? Or, rather, what were the books that you absorbed and from which you drew sustenance? They were real books—not predigested infant's food. The worst of this predigesting business, this rewriting for children, is that in the process of serving up the work of a great writer through the medium of a little writer the wine, however good originally, tastes of the bottle and the cork; the process is devitalizing.

I experienced the other day a feeling of genuine shock when I looked at a leaflet my little children (of three, five, and six years) brought home with them from Sunday school. The lesson was from Isaiah—the original passage is familiar and beautiful:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.

Above it stood the seraphim: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.

And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.

And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.

Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar.

And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.

But this is what I read in the leaflet:

Isaiah, the prophet, often went into the temple to pray.

In a vision, in the temple, Isaiah

saw the Lord sitting up on his high throne.

Shining angels stood on each side of the throne of God.

They sang to one another, saying, "The Lord is holy."

The doorposts trembled with the sound of their voices.

Isaiah was troubled when he saw the Lord, for he felt that his own heart was full of sin.

One of the angels told Isaiah that his sins were now taken away.

Isaiah heard the Lord ask whom he should send to preach to his people.

Isaiah said, Here am I; send me.

How pallid is the leaflet rendering beside the original's force and power! And why on earth did the good lady think it necessary? Had she so little belief in Holy Scripture that she was unwilling to trust the babes with the vision of Isaiah and its striking imagery? And the worst of such rendering—or rendering—is that it defeats its purpose. The child doesn't remember it so well. Why should he? It isn't so memorable.

So with the Easter lesson—the beautiful incident of Christ's appearance to the disciples in the upper room and his words to Thomas (surely simple enough for any child's comprehension) were altered. "Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side; and be not faithless, but believing." Instead we have: "Christ told Thomas to put his finger into the print of the nails," etc.

The change is the change from a picture into a plain statement of fact. And in most of the stories from the Bible done for children the change is always this, from the dramatic to the easier narrative form. And the stories lose immeasurably! So do the children.

Our English Bible in the King James's version is very beautiful, very noble. Not only that, it is deeply inwrought into our English literature. Delete the Bible allusions and references from the work of Milton, Browning, Tennyson, Herbert, Donne—of prose writers from Sir Thomas Browne to Ruskin—and envisage the irreparable gaps! A thorough knowledge of the Bible has been an integral part of the training of the men and women who, in the past, have counted for something. How often do we find the "Bible and Shakespeare" serving as the strong roots from which many a fair tree of scholarship has up-reared itself!

Why should we defraud our children of this rich inheritance?

And the time of all others for gaining a familiarity with the English Bible is in very early childhood.

It is well enough that they know the story, the gist of the narrative, but what is gained by not giving them the text? And how much admirable grounding in our English speech is lost!

Those of us who were fortunate enough to have had a childhood wherein the daily reading of the Bible aloud was an integral part of the home life, coming as certainly as breakfast (and in point of time, just after it), would be most unwilling to give up the memory or to give up the familiarity with the stately procession of Old Testament folk that passed before the childish horizon, vivid as the "Arabian Nights," and more closely related. It was Old Testament chiefly, as I remember it, because we youngsters liked it, with the Psalms (which our parents liked) interspersed on days when one of us little folk happened to miss the reading. And to miss "what happened next" was a real distress! Yet, though at that time we didn't especially care for the Psalms, they were firmly fixed in the memory in all their beauty and poetry.

There is nothing in the King James's text that presents any great difficulty to childish hearers. Of course there are bits to omit, but any intelligent mother can manage that. And it appeals to children. It is dramatic—intensely dramatic—and children love the dramatic. All the folk tales and fairy tales that are best loved by little folk are dramatic, and written almost in dramatic form. That the child understands every word is quite unimportant. When was complete understanding ever necessary to enjoyment? In fact, the lack of it is to a child an added charm, for at each successive reading he gets a bit more.

Exegesis, explanation, authenticity—all discussion of these can wait until adolescence. I was reading to a three-year-old the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and the fiery furnace. Of course I had to "read it again" and "read it again," and thereafter for weeks tell it as a bedtime story (for the suggestion of warmth, I fancy, for our New Hampshire thermometer stood at 30° below). But was I allowed to omit one instrument from the list—"Cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psalter, and dulcimer, and all kinds of musick"? Not one. There was a certain sonorousness in the repetition the little fellow liked.

The committing to memory of passages and chapters and of Psalms even by very little children doesn't hurt a child in the least. He does it easily, often by repeated reading, unconsciously. And many a thing learned unthinkingly in childhood stands by one at a critical time in after life—an "anchor to windward" my sea-captain father used to say.

The lately published "Diary of Opal" throws interesting light on how much a very young child can appreciate of high endeavor. Consider how much solace in

the child's loneliness was hers because of teaching her mother had given her before *six*! Would a familiarity with Peter Rabbit or the Little Red Hen have given the spiritual sustainment?

One need not emulate Susannah Wesley (mother of John and Charles—and of sixteen children besides), who upon the day that each child attained the age of five years started the little one in at Genesis, without even a primer to break the shock. But John and Charles Wesley were creditable sons. Though we do not go to her extreme, surely it is time to give our children something besides the trivialities with which their minds have been deluged.

The heroic appeals to little children; they love imagery. Even little children are far more susceptible to a high idealism than we think; I believe they need stronger and simpler food than that usually allotted to them. Try them, gentle reader! Daniel and his companions besought the king's eunuch to give them pulse to eat, and their countenances were fairer and fatter than any of their companions who were fed the more highly seasoned diet of "meat from the king's table."

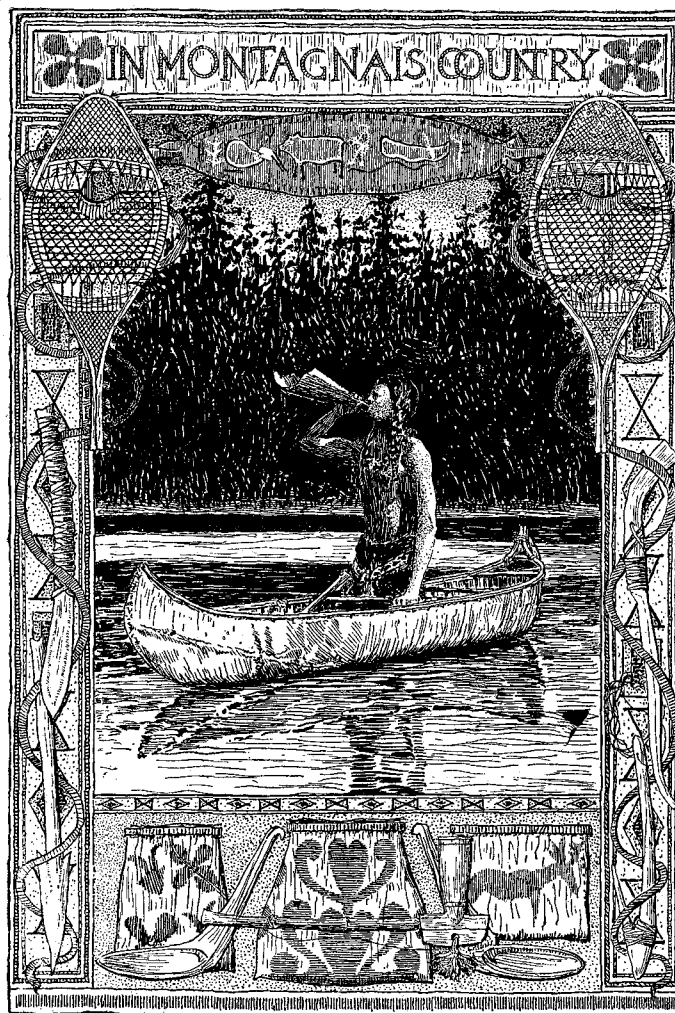
I am not urging that we make children old before their time, but that we give their minds a rest from the eternal drivel that is poured into them and return to what formerly constituted a large part of infant fare, namely, large portions of English poetry and the Bible. Why distress yourself about bedtime stories, dear sir or madam? Leave for the moment Tommy Titmouse and Johnny Woodchuck. Have Grimm and Hans Andersen, Robinson Crusoe—and for the rest dust off your Bible and begin at Genesis.

ROMANCE AND REALITY IN INDIAN LIFE

IN a handsomely printed and well-illustrated quarto volume¹ the editor and her contributors undertake what they tell us is a labor of love. They seek to make American readers who are not ethnologists acquainted with the nature, feeling, and imagination of the American Indian. The plan is a novel one. Here are some dozen or more professional anthropologists, ethnologists, and curators of museums who deliberately choose the medium of romantic relation as the best way of making us understand the Indian.

The reason for this plan is that, while there has been an immense amount written about the Indian, the scientific side (presented largely in dry monographs) has been too dull to get itself read, while the romantic side has shown us good Indians and bad Indians, but hardly ever the true Indian. Since the day

¹ American Indian Life. Edited by Elsie Clews Parsons. Illustrations by C. Grant La Farge. B. W. Huebsch, Inc., New York. \$10.



THE AMERICAN INDIAN

A drawing by C. Grant La Farge from "American Indian Life"

when Fenimore Cooper idealized the Indian and was followed by a long list of romantic writers, and the day when the early dime novelist described the "red devils" in a purely diabolical way, and was followed in this by writers of more elaborate and expensive but not more accurate sensational stories of our time, there has been little in the way of fiction that has not misled the general reader in one direction or the other. Thus the American Indian is fast becoming legendary and the actual knowledge about him is confined to the ranks of professional students. This book provides vivid and authentic pictures of experiences, tribal or individual, so that it may be recommended both to those who want to read vivid legends and tales of Indian life and to those who want to get correct views of how the Indians lived in village and camp, how they made love and war, and what their social and religious customs were.

The editor is herself one of the few white Americans who is a member by adoption of an Indian tribe (the Hopis), and she writes with special knowledge of the Zuni. In the same way the contributors write, each of a tribe or group of tribes of which he has special knowledge. It is quite notable how readily

these writers, who are almost all scientific specialists, accommodate themselves to the general plan of telling stories rather than of writing essays.

The planners of the book have been fortunate enough to secure the aid of Mr. C. Grant La Farge in its illustration. The many full-page drawings in black and white and the six full pages in color fit the text and the purpose of the work admirably. They are based on a thorough study of museum collections and show characteristic features of Indian art as well as illustrating the text specifically. One of these pictures we reproduce herewith.

The element of historical information and of scientific ethnology is provided by an extremely readable Introduction and by careful appendices and bibliographies. One interesting comment by the writer of the Introduction, Professor A. L. Kroeber, of the University of California, is the warning he gives the reader that any such effort to depict Indian life by story must be a little out of balance because it leaves the reader impressed with the ritual and ceremonial attitude of the Indians toward religion, while, on the other hand, it almost necessarily leaves out the factor of Indian humor, not because humor