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The Canadian Bookshelf

Much Concerning the Appreciation of Books by Sincere Readers

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THE object, "book," is technically defined as any printed or written literary composition, forming a considerable collection of leaves. Such is the cold and formal statement of the mere dictionary maker. When we turn to the poets and philosophers for their descriptions of a book, we find Carlyle declaring—"May blessings be upon the heads of Cadmus, the Phoenicians or whoever it was that invented books!" While Milton pays undying testimony to their influence in the words: "A good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life."

We know nothing, whatever, about the first book ever produced, but may take it for granted that it was etched with thorns upon the leaves torn from the forest branches, as the book and the beech are etymologically akin. So it has come down to us through the centuries, from freshly-plucked leaves, papyri, parchment and paper to the modern product of the spruce tree. Yet the essence of books has remained the same, where is preserved, "as in a vial, the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them."

A man who has travelled much once remarked: "Let me examine the bookshelves, and I know the nature of the household." The book we buy may not betoken us, for sometimes a book is bought from a mere freak of fashion, or a desire to possess the outward sign of a literary equipment; but the book which we read until it shows the signs of constant handling is a sure indication of the reader's spirit.

Some years ago, in a small town of Western Ontario, there was a group of citizens chatting over the success which had come to the boys of a certain family in the neighbourhood.

"Every one of those boys has turned out well," said a merchant, "and they had precious few advantages."

"I always believed in those boys," said their grey-haired pastor, with a confident nod.

"Yes, I remember how you used to help John with his Latin and tell Joe that he'd make a civil engineer. And yet they had a hard time for years—when the father died and it looked as if the mother couldn't keep the farm."

"I noticed one thing the first time I called," said the minister, "and that was the bookshelf in the dining-room. I don't think it held more than thirty books, but there wasn't a single trashy one among them, and each book had been read until it was almost threadbare. I stayed to tea, and I don't think I ever enjoyed a finer talk than with that little woman, who had read 'Sesame and Lilies' again and again and who, I believe, knew 'In Memoriam' by heart. And there wasn't a farmer's wife in the township who made better butter."

"Yes, that bookshelf had a deal to do with it," said the school-teacher. "There wasn't one of the boys who didn't know wheat from chaff in the reading."

THE conversation seemed but the passing comment of an idle hour, but, somehow, it has been remembered and that farm-house bookshelf has taken on a significance which has been emphasized by the lives of the boys who were once familiar with its red-and-green-backed contents.

The present age is one which considers diet very carefully and talks learnedly about calories and proteids. We have learned that food in the frying pan means indigestion in the human consumer of

such viands. Domestic science is endeavouring to adjust the daily diet to the capacity and functions of the human stomach. Some of the housewives who are most careful about the family diet are utterly indifferent to the mental fare with which the boys and girls are stimulating or deadening their imaginative powers. Can we expect a generation accustomed to the vulgar atrocities of the "coloured comic" sections of certain of our newspapers to appreciate either literature or art? The law of cause and effect works inexorably, and, as Mr. Balfour has reminded us, "taste is hardly to



Stephen Leacock, Author of "Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town," Began to be a Humourist by Writing "A Boarding House Geometry." He is Now Chief Author-ity on the High Cost of Living at McGill.

be acquired by industry." The boy who has a few books worth reading is infinitely better off than the boy who is supplied with abundance of vulgar trash. We exclaim over the sentimental folly of the girl who lavishes her youthful affections on an utterly unworthy object. Probably her foolish young head has been stuffed from childhood with fiction which is worse than useless—namby-pamby stuff, without a vigorous thought or original sentiment from the first chapter to *finis*. What wonder that she has no idea of life's values, and mistakes tinsel for gold every time that her young eyes are dazzled?

One does not wish for a moment to restrict young readers to the reflections of Marcus Aurelius or the precepts of Epictetus. There is a wealth of literature, suitable for juvenile readers, to which we can turn; and its very richness makes the neglect of the opportunity to explore it the more deplorable. There is clean humour and harmless fun to be obtained from books which will leave an abiding memory of pleasure and delight. Books are not dead. They are living forces which become a part of our thoughts and deeds and extend their influence to the very ends of the earth. The little girl's naive inquiry when she heard of Joel Chandler Harris' death—"Don't you suppose that Br'er Rabbit is sorry?"—shows the close appeal of his stories to the childish heart and imagination.

If the youthful mind is fed with vulgar smart-

ness pretending to be "comic," we must look in vain for appreciation of finer things from the woman or the man. "The greatest debt I owe my father," said a prominent Canadian, who has had a long and honourable career, "is an appreciation of good books. He talked to us every evening of what we had read and seemed to enjoy Jules Verne as much as any of the boys. We were not denied stories of hairbreadth adventure, such as every boy longs for, but the sordid and unhealthy stories where crime is given a romantic halo were quietly discouraged."

The flood of fiction which has been pouring from the presses for the last twenty years shows some sign of abatement, and the recent interest manifested in the more serious publications is a hopeful sign. Fiction is one of the highest forms of literary art, but the exclusive reading of novels is not conducive to symmetrical development. History, biography and philosophy are needed in our libraries, while the field of modern scientific investigation alone has supplied the world with volumes of fascinating interest, written with unique charm of style.

THIS is a newspaper age, when the Saturday edition is supposed to supply the Sunday reading, with its special articles on all "live" subjects, from the latest discoveries in radioactivity to a discussion of Mrs. Gertrude Atherton's views on the passing of love. Then we have the weekly review of events, illustrated and unillustrated, and the monthly magazines, with their wealth of philosophic and literary articles and their decoration by the most advanced illustrative art. All these may bestrew the library table, but they cannot take the place of the bookshelf. We must remember, also, the distinction which Ruskin made, between the books which are good for a time and the books which are good for *all* time. We cannot afford to let our reading be composed entirely of newspapers and magazines, any more than we can afford to make a meal of a salad or a dessert.

The editor of a well-known United States paper was asked by a youthful and aspiring journalist why the editorials of his publication had a somewhat unusual flavour, a touch of seriousness which introduced an element of permanence into the paragraph of the day.

"I don't know," was the modest reply, "unless it is that I do not let a day pass, however busy I may be, without reading for at least a quarter-of-an-hour a book which is old enough to take one away from the petty worries of the hour. To-day it was one of Bacon's Essays and yesterday it was a bit of 'Sartor Resartus.' And, for a genuine sedative, give me old Plato."

In considering the books of to-day, it is essential that we should be supplied with the literature relating to our own country. Canadians have shown amazing indifference in the past to the history of their land and to the problems of its development. There should be on every Canadian bookshelf the best histories of the Dominion, and biographies of its Makers. While we are considering the fiction corner, let us remember Sir Gilbert Parker and Mrs. Everard Cotes, not to mention Kirby's memorable romance. How many of us know anything of the writings of Dr. John Beattie Crozier, a Canadian by birth, whose works on social and political philosophy have met with appreciative reviews in the old land. If we wish for the most modern treatment of problems relating to revolutionizing