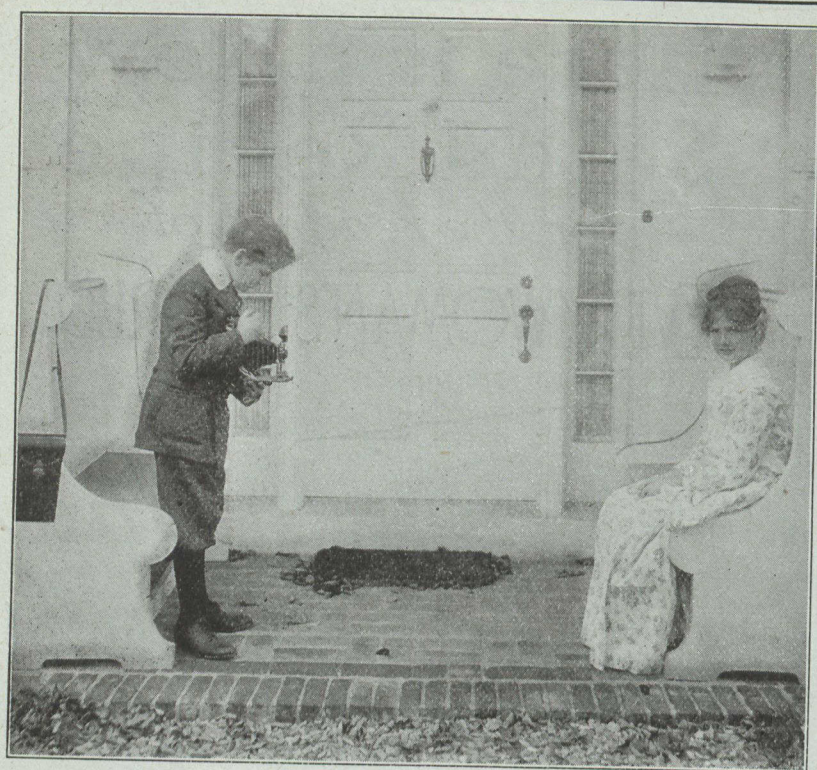


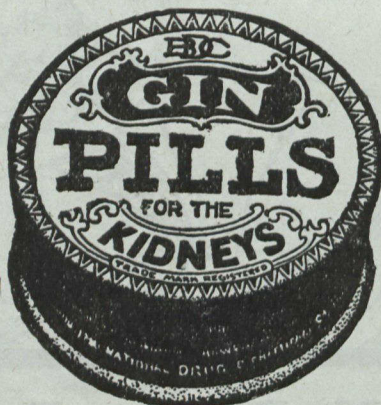


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Our Parents' Assistant

TEACHING CHILDREN TO LOVE GOOD BOOKS

By A. WYLIE MAHON

SOME one has said that to love a good woman is a liberal education. The same may be said of love for a good book, for it moulds the character and shapes the destiny and contributes to the happiness and usefulness as scarcely anything else can do.

Some children grow up in a home where the atmosphere is literary, where the love of a good book comes to them as naturally as their teeth, and far more enjoyably. The first word which Edmund Gosse, the celebrated English man of letters, spoke was "book." Before they could teach him to say "father" or "mother" he said "book," and his passion for his first love increased with the years.

There is no more interesting story in Canadian literature than that of the old rectory at Fredericton, New Brunswick, where the members of the Roberts family were brought up. It was a beautiful home where all the best things in life and literature were cherished in a loving way. Southey himself, who loved his books almost as much as he did his children, and who, when he was unable to read, would take them down from the shelf, and hold them caressingly in his hands, and kiss them good-bye as he put them back in their place, had no warmer spot in his heart for books than had Canon Roberts and his talented wife. No wonder we find that the children of that home were booklovers from childhood. As soon as they were able to read and write they engaged in literary work for themselves, in a childish way, which developed into a little home magazine, which was edited in the garret, to which each member of the family — father, mother and all—was bound to contribute something, either a story or a poem or a sketch or at least a joke.

In a literary atmosphere like this it is an easy matter for children to develop a love for good books; they drink in this spirit at every pore; but homes like this are the exception, not the rule. How can children brought up in homes where there is no good literature learn to love good books?

There was a time when no Scotch home was looked upon as well-furnished without a Bible and a copy of Burns, and both were committed to memory, were learned by heart. But we are not so well off in Canada. The dust of days and weeks has gathered on many a family Bible, and there is no one to take the place of Bobbie Burns. In many homes the books and magazines which are read are not the kind of literature to enter helpfully into the life of the family. Eleanor Porter's charming Pollyanna says that Miss Polly must have lived on wormwood and thistles, she was so bitter and prickly. Some children are brought up on books which are far worse than wormwood and thistles, on thrilling tales of impossible adventure, or sensational love-stories which corrupt the taste and morals and furnish false ideals of life. These books and magazines have nothing in them to develop the better side of life, nothing to awaken a spirit of love and helpfulness in the heart. This is a serious matter to which home-makers and home-lovers cannot give too much earnest thought.

Good literature is so cheap to-day that no home need be without it. But we are told that it is no use buying good books, for children will not read them. It depends more upon the books than it does upon the children. The man who took home one of Henry James' novels for his children to read, because he heard his minister refer to it as a good book, was of course doomed to disappointment. All the candy in the corner store would not have tempted them to wade through a single page of this philosophical story of almost interminable sentences. If he had invested in one of L. M. Montgomery's charming stories, the children would have taken to it as an angel to minister. No one in Canada has done more than Miss Montgomery to teach girls to love a good book. I have known children to read the "Anne" books over and over again, and to look for a new one as feverishly as some newspaper men look for the first robin in spring time.

The late Professor James De Mille, of Dalhousie College, Halifax, wrote a number of boys' stories—the B. O. W. C. series, the Brethren of the Order of the White Cross—which are ideal books for the young, especially for young Canadians. They describe some of the innocent pranks and thrilling adventures by land and sea, and hairbreadth escapes of the members of the secret society of Grand Pre School. These books are enlivened with a humour which is rich and free from vulgarity and profanity, and contain the most interesting descriptions of historical and romantic spots in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick ever written.

With charming Canadian stories for boys and girls in the home, no one is likely to grow up without some love for a good book.

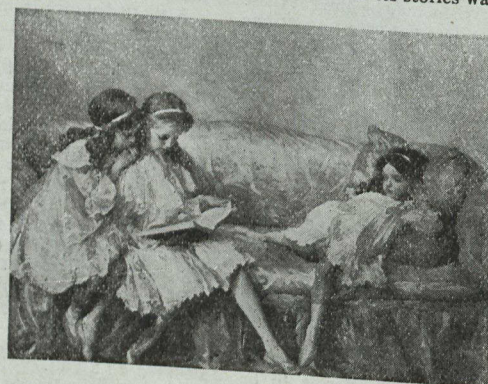
A distinguished American writer has said that all normal babies born into the world bring with them a love for poetry and music, as is evidenced in the soothing effect of a mother's "Rockaby, Baby." If Wordsworth is right in saying that—

"Trailing clouds of glory, do we come
From God who is our home,"

it is not hard to believe that we come into this world susceptible to the musical rhythm of sweet sounds. No wonder poets are declaiming against the scientists who are teaching fathers to take the rockers off the cradle, and deprive these trailing clouds of glory of the sweet lullabies which their poetic natures crave, and also deprive mothers of the darling privilege of rocking the cradle while they rule the world, and at the same time knit socks for the soldiers.

Before children are able to read for themselves a great deal can be done to awaken a love for a good story in the child's heart. What an ideal picture we have of the Rossetti's home, with the children gathered about their mother, listening with open-eyed wonder to the stories which she told. If a mother's heart is the child's school-room, no children ever got a finer start in education than the two boys and two girls of that most remarkable family of lovers. Mrs. Rossetti was a beautiful character who taught her children very early to love the choicest things in life and literature. The Bible always held its place in that home as the chief text-book, and the influence of its stories was mightily felt in mould-

ing the characters of the children, and in developing a literary style noted for its sweet simplicity and spiritual grace. Mrs. Rossetti could tell a story well, and a good deal of the information which she imparted in history and literature was put in this form. Long afterwards, her youngest daughter, Christina, in dedicating one of her books to her mother—she dedicated them all to her—put the dedication in these words:



The Children's Reading Hour

"To My Dearest Mother
In Grateful Remembrance of the Stories
With which she used to entertain her children."

The library in which a child plays has been known to awaken a love for books in the heart. Sir Robertson Nicoll, of world-wide reputation as the editor of the British Weekly, one of the most distinguished literary geniuses of our day, traces his love for books back to his father's library in the old manse in a little Scottish parish. His father was a booklover if ever there were one. A gentleman in Toronto, who was brought up in the village where the Nicolls lived, tells how the present Sir Robertson used to be sent out after dark with a wheelbarrow to bring his father's latest purchase of second-hand books home. It was necessary for the boy to reach home by a back lane that the neighbors might not see him, for his father's parishioners found fault with the way their minister wasted his money upon books.

The responsibility for teaching children to love good books rest with the public school as well as with the home. An American writer has recently uttered an alarming protest about the way Shakespeare is taught in the schools of the United States.

I wonder if we are succeeding better than this in Canada? The writer was singularly fortunate in his college days in having Professor De Mille, to whom reference has already been made, as the author of boys' books, for his teacher.

An amusing illustration is afforded of his genius for making almost any subject interesting in the way he taught his invalid daughter geography and history. He would appear before her as "Mr. Geography" with a map of Nova Scotia, which looked like a rabbit which had forgotten to grow its legs, pinned on his coat. When the subject was history, he would appear as "Mr. History," with a box of dates in his hand for solemnity he would ask her to swallow one of the dates with each new event in the history of the period. Some will wonder how many boxes of histories interesting.

Improved methods of teaching children to love good books have been introduced into the public schools, where the teacher selects an interesting story and reads it aloud to the pupils, and then gives them an opportunity of asking questions. Story period soon comes to be the most interesting part of the day's work.

Young people are sadly handicapped who start out in life without a love for good books, who are compelled to seek for companions on the street, and for pleasure at the movies. A love for the beautiful things in literature is the sun and shield of many a life, is the inspiration which goes to the making of the highest types of manhood and womanhood.